Un Giorno Per Noi

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Un Giorno Per Noi

by Novaviis

Summary

Somethings are meant to stay dead; the past, relationships, people. Feliciano knows this all too well. An innocent holiday in Austria for Christmas soon digs up painful memories better left buried. Through mulled wine, an abandoned Cathedral, and debates on the romantic merits of Romeo & Juliet, Feliciano struggles to do one thing: keep Ludwig from remembering his past for the sake of his life.

Notes

So, I'm a Catholic but I'm not like – a good Catholic. I'm the lapsed kind that drinks too much wine and doesn't want to disappoint their grandma.

I started this story last year, but I've had it haunting me since about 2011. It was one of those things that I'd make up scenes for while listening to music and daydreaming on the bus to school. Around this time last year I sat down and told myself I'd finally write it, and I'd do it in time for Christmas - that didn't happen. I got through the first chapter and suddenly it was the New Year.

This year, I picked it back up for NanoWrimo - which, by some miracle, I actually completed. The story isn't finished yet, and I've got another chapter and an epilogue to get through, but I'm 50k words in so I feel like it's safe enough to say that I'll have it finished in time. There are a few things I do want to say, though, because this is the first time I've written anything so far ahead of posting (I am, if nothing else, a bitch that survives off instant gratification).

First, I'll be the first to admit, this probably isn't entirely historically accurate. I did my best to get things in line with major events, but I set out to write a story, not an essay. So, I took some liberties here and there, but I don't think it's enough to distract from the story. Second, to be honest I didn't focus all that much on the central antagonist. He doesn't come in until much later, says little, and serves his purpose. I'm all for well fleshed out villains, but this isn't about the villain. So - I don't know, I'm aware of that flaw in the story, I guess.

Finally, this story is grossly romantic, it's over dramatic, the characters are morons, and nothing makes sense. But I wrote it, and I like it, and I want to share it with you. Enjoy.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [Restricted Work] by Teirakeiso

Chapter 1

Austria, 1640's

It took Ludwig a considerable amount of strength to push the robust oak door open. It took both Ludwig and Feliciano pushing their entire bodies against the door to push it closed again. The wind pushed back. Howling through the closing gap, pitching high up into the vaulted ceilings, the snow whipped into their faces in icy shards until, finally, they managed to get the wooden beam down to lock it shut. The boys leaned back against the door, sliding down to the stone tiles to catch their breaths. The wind continued to whistle and whine outside, but within the walls of the old Cathedral, they were safe from the bitter Alpine winter.

Feliciano was the first to laugh. Tilting his head back against the door, he sighed out of breath, cheeks raw and pink from the cold. Snow began to melt from the top of his head and down to the tips of his auburn hair, dripping down the sides of his neck.

"I fail to see what you find so amusing," Ludwig huffed as he pushed his hand back through his platinum hair. It stayed slicked back for a moment, only to fall into his eyes again.

Feliciano only shrugged. "You *were* hesitant to skip Mass this morning."

Ludwig sighed, dropping his head. His damp hair plastered against his forehead until he stubbornly tried to push it back again. "I suppose this is our punishment."

"Punishment?" Feliciano laughed again. "I wouldn't call this punishment."

Ludwig scoffed. "Stuck inside a cathedral halfway up the mountain in the middle of a blizzard?"

"With you," Feliciano corrected.

Ludwig averted his gaze, tilting his head away. Even still, Feliciano could see the rouge tint at the tip of his ears. "Roderich will scold you for running off."

Feliciano, once again, was ready to correct him. "But he can't scold *you* ," he said as he pushed himself to his feet. "So long as I am with you, I'm safe." With a brilliant smile, Feliciano offered his companion his hand.

Ludwig appraised him for a long moment before shaking his head. Bracing one hand on the door, he took Feliciano's hand with the other, and staggered to his feet. "It's not that he can't," Ludwig commented with a grunt, "but he shouldn't. I may be the Empire, but he still thinks of himself as my superior because he is my elder." Ludwig's face twisted. "The Generals and Lords do the same. No one takes me seriously."

Feliciano had seen that much for himself. He didn't have much to do with the War, not with his station. He was only just higher than a common servant in “Austria's” household. Despite that, he had seen the leaders of the Empire, the way they spoke over Ludwig. Feliciano and Ludwig may have only appeared to be about fourteen years old in human years, but their centuries of life were incomprehensible to even the highest Kings and Emperors. Feliciano found it mildly frustrating at times. He could only imagine what it was like for Ludwig.

“I take you seriously,” Feliciano said.

Ludwig raised a brow, a spark of mirth in his eyes. “No, you don't.”

“You're right,” Feliciano giggled. “But I do take you seriously as Holy Rome. As Ludwig, you are just Ludwig, and that is plenty to me.”

Ludwig didn't say anything in response. Couldn’t, really. Feliciano spoke as if it were the simplest fact in the world, and the gravity of his words was no lighter than a downy feather, when they hit him like the blast of a canon. Turning away from Feliciano he directed his attention toward the empty Cathedral.

The emptiness was overwhelming. Every breath felt like an intrusion. It was a basilica they'd been to a thousand times before, though never at an abandoned hour. The lack of laity and clergy was startling to say the least.

It was called Sankt Bacchus. The cavernous space swallowed them whole in Gothic detail. Down the nave of the church, the long aisle of pews stretched up toward the chancel, where the pillars stopped and opened up into the apse over the sanctuary. The floor was clean, baroque tiles laid in rich patterns, glistening with what little light there was inside. On either side of the cathedral, beneath the two tiers of balconies lining the nave, faded statues of the saints stood surrounded by kneeling pews and offering candles with wax dripping down onto the marble tiles. They, in turn, lined the way toward the side altars and confession booths.

Overhead, the smooth stone pillars stretched like ancient trees toward the vaulted arches the ceiling, painted with blue and azure, and dotted with gold stars. The domed apse burst with more deep blues, accented with red, purple, silver, and gold creating scenes of heaven. Angels gazed down over the high altar from the facade of the sanctuary, rising up in spires decorated in gold like the towers of a divine castle. And, in the center, the crucifix.

Ludwig's mouth tightened. “We shouldn't be here.”

Feliciano walked toward a copper vat of Holy Water that had been left from the last Mass. A thin sheet of ice had spread over the surface. He dipped his finger tip in and watched as the ice fractured under this touch. “The bishop is off in Vienna,” he said, “and the priests are in the village. It's much too cold for anyone to be out here.”

Ludwig, despite himself, laughed. “You don't say.”

Feliciano flicked the water off his finger at him. “I *mean* that no one will find us. And who is going to tell the bishop?” he gestured toward the sanctuary. “Christ? I don't really think he will mind.”

Ludwig sputtered, looking for a moment like he should reprimand Feliciano for speaking so candidly – until he realized that he had a point. And that the alternative was making the trek back down the mountain. “Fine.”

Feliciano smiled. “Good.” Walking ahead, he made his way down the central aisle, eyes wandering over the thousands of details covering every inch of the cathedral as if seeing it all for the first time. Ludwig followed several paces behind.

Coming to the chancel, Feliciano paused and turned around himself in circles. Finally, turning away from the crucifix, he began to undo his coat and push it off his arms, followed by his vest. Sitting on the steps of the altar, he kicked off his boots and began to pull off his stockings, until he was left only in his breeches and loose linen shirt. When he looked up again, Ludwig was pink all over.

“W-what are you doing?” he stammered.

Feliciano only shrugged. “I don't want to catch ill,” he replied.

Ludwig frowned. “You'll only be colder with less clothing on.”

“No, I'll be colder if I'm wearing wet clothing. I'll hang them up to dry and put them back on later. You should take off your cloak and doublet, too.” Even as he made his argument, Feliciano flinched as his bare feet came into contact with the cold stone. It took a moment to get used to. Standing up again, he gathered his clothes and hung them up to dry on the first row of pews. The clergy surely would have had a heart attack and a half if they saw him. Feliciano didn't seem all that bothered by it.

Ludwig watched Feliciano smooth his clothes out over the pews, fiddling with the edges of his cloak, before finally giving in. “I'd hoped we wouldn't be stuck in here long enough for that,” he sighed as he unfastened his collar.

“It can't be helped,” Feliciano replied. “You've been away too long fighting in Italy and France. The winters have been brutal lately, I don't think it's likely to let up any time soon.”

“Maybe I have,” Ludwig laughed under his breath. Undressing down to his trousers and shirt, and laid his clothes out next to Feliciano's. The Italian, he didn't fail to notice, was quick to scamper off in the other direction.

“If we are going to be here for a while,” Feliciano called as he ran around a far pillar and disappeared to the right side altar, “we're going to need light and warmth.” He was silent for a moment, before poking his head around the corner again. He opened his mouth –

Ludwig stopped him. “We are not lighting a fire in the church.”

Feliciano frowned. His hand came up, forefinger and thumb pinching an inch apart.

“Not even a small one.”

Unabashedly rolling his eyes, Feliciano vanished into the side altar again. Ludwig shook his head. For one of the most staunchly traditional Catholic Nations in Europe, Feliciano seemed

to have an easy attitude toward blasphemy and religious taboos. Granted, Ludwig could not think of any page in the Holy Bible dedicated to starting small fires in churches, but he was fairly certain it was at least frowned upon.

Feliciano reappeared moments later with an arm full of glass candle jars, tinted with hues of rose and violet. “These will have to do, then.”

Ludwig rubbed his hand over his forehead. “Are those the offering candles?”

Feliciano, again, rolled his eyes. “Unless you'd like to freeze to death, I am not finding many other options.” Kneeling on the floor, Feliciano set them down in a cluster. “They won't do much for heat or light, but it is better than nothing.”

Try as he might, Ludwig couldn't think of any other arguments. So, at least making himself useful, he began to gather as many candles from the side altars as he could find. Before long, they had dozens of candle jars grouped together in a large circle. Now, though, came the task of lighting them.

Finding a source flame wasn't all that difficult. In the dark of the Cathedral, there were only a sparse few candles left lit from the last mass. Ludwig stood after he'd finished neatening their circle of candles, eyes scanning the cavernous space until he spotted the closest light. On the altar, sitting off on the side, an Advent wreath sat with the first purple candle still flickering with a tiny flame. Walking up to the sanctuary, Ludwig paused, bowed quickly on one knee before taking the few steps up the altar. There, he plucked the candle from its evergreen nest and brought it down. Picking up one of the jars, he lit it with the Advent candle and set it down again.

Feliciano watched him, leaning back against the altar steps with his knees drawn up to his chest. “That seems a little sacrilegious of you, Ludwig,” he teased.

“You are a bad influence,” Ludwig was quick to reply, drawing a scandalized gasp from his companion. Ludwig only laughed, his smile glowing faintly with gold. “Now, come help me light these.”

Together, the boys slowly lit each candle from the flame of another, making their way from the inside of their huddled circle to the outside, their little beacon of glimmering light growing steadily. The colours of the glass jars reflected onto the polished marble of the floor like a mirror. As Ludwig came to the last jar on his side, the Advent candle finally gave out in a serpentine column of sweet smoke. He looked down at the candle with disdain, wax dripping over his fingers.

Glancing up when he smelled the smoke, Feliciano lifted one of his jars. He laid his hand over Ludwig's, guiding the wick to dip into his flame. Their eyes met over the amber glow, fire light gleaming in their eyes. Ludwig was quick to look away, clearing his throat as he lit the last candle. Blowing out the Advent candle to preserve what wax and wick remained, he stood again and return it to the wreath on the altar. When he returned, Feliciano was already warming his hands over their makeshift fire. The flames of the candles combined cast a warm light up into the vaults of the ceiling, shadows twitching behind every contour.

Ludwig lowered himself down next to Feliciano, drawing one knee up against his chest. The heat of the candles did make a considerable difference, but it did not change the fact that they were caught in a blizzard. “I cannot wait for spring,” he grunted.

“I can,” Feliciano muttered as he rubbed his palms together. “You'll have to leave in spring.”

“I won't be gone too long,” Ludwig said.

Feliciano glanced up at him, auburn locks falling over his eyes. He raised a brow. “That's what you said the last time you left.”

“I wasn't gone that long!”

“You were gone *for eight years* !”

Ludwig shifted irritably. “Yes, well, there's a war going on, in case you hadn't noticed. I don't often have time to come back to *rural Austria* .”

Feliciano's expression changed – smoothed over like the marble statue of Saint Sergius behind him, entirely blank with only the suggestion of pain. “Right,” he said matter-of-factly. Pushing himself to his feet, he dusted off his breeches and glared down at Ludwig. “After all, what is there in *rural Austria* for you to come back for?”

Ludwig flinched. “That isn't want I meant-” but Feliciano was already turning on a bare heel and stalking away. Ludwig reached out after him, his name falling silent from his tongue as he sighed. His hand dropped back down to his side. They often called Feliciano's brother the stubborn one, but few other nations ever got the pleasure to see Feliciano in a foul mood like this – or be the one to put him in it.

Time passed in relative quiet. Feliciano’s usually talkative nature turned to bitter silence. The Cathedral was entirely dark, save for the sparse patches of moonlight slivering from between the clouds, and the golden reflection of the candles. They continued to burn smoothly, an inch of melted wax shining translucent from each jar. Feliciano did not disappear entirely, but it was clear that he wasn't in the mood for conversation, and Ludwig wasn't sure how to apologize. He'd been insensitive, he knew that, but he couldn't very well take back when he'd said, no matter how deeply he regretted the way he’d said it. It hadn't been a lie.

So, he watched as Feliciano wandered around the Cathedral. His curiosity lead him down invisible paths through the pews, the aisles, the ambulatory and side chapels, and even Ludwig was fairly certain up to the bell tower at one point. Maybe the movement was just helping to keep him warm. Ludwig had lost track of him at that point, though he could still hear Feliciano's light footsteps echoing off the high vaults of the ceiling. Staring into the flames, Ludwig let his mind wander aimlessly, until a silhouette eclipsed above him and broke him from his thoughts.

Feliciano stood in the third balcony, leaning against the balustrade. He looked as if he could reach out and touch the golden stars painted on the ceiling, his skin illuminated in the dim moonlight cascading in from the stained glass windows. Ludwig found himself staring, and

surprisingly, found he didn't mind it. He etched the image into his memory, a tightness seizing his chest.

“You know,” Ludwig began, slowly. His voice, soft as it was, caused Feliciano to jump slightly. Ludwig dipped his head. “I… I saw a play while I was in Frankfurt. It was about three years ago.”

Feliciano looked down at him, arms folding against the balustrade. “Oh?”

Ludwig cleared his throat. “It was just – uhm, you, on the balcony. You reminded me, is all.” He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “I think you would like it.” He hoped so, at least. Ludwig had a copy of it stashed away in one of his trunks as a Christmas present for Feliciano. It was a crude translation into Italian, and he was sure even the transcript wasn't completely faithful to the original, but he'd done his best to find a copy at all.

Feliciano leaned over, resting his head on his folded arms. “So, tell me about it.”

“About what?”

“About the play.”

“Well,” Ludwig started. “It took place in Italy. One of your towns in the North, I can't quite recall the name. Something that began with an F or V.”

Feliciano tilted his head. “Florence? Venice?”

“No,” Ludwig shook his head. “It was... Ver-something.”

“Verona?”

“Yes, that was it,” Ludwig's brow furrowed in thought. “There was a scene – the young woman was standing on her balcony, and the young man was watching her from the garden below. I thought it was, uhm... rather romantic. In any case, it was written by some Englishman several decades ago.”

Feliciano gasped in feigned shock. “A play by the enemy, Ludwig? How could you support such a thing?”

“Yes, well,” Ludwig gazed up at him. His eyes were heavy, and the corners of his mouth light. “Maybe not everything has to be about War.”

Feliciano's lips faultered into a dim smile, gaze softening. The apology was all at once silent and accepted. Pushing away from the balustrade, Feliciano made his way to the back of the nave, where the grand pipe organ loomed over the doorway. He disappeared into a narrow stairwell, and reappeared on the main floor moments later, padding down the aisle toward their little pond of light. His approach slowed as he came near, though, attention swallowed in by the grand backdrop of the sanctuary, until he stopped all together at the edge of the altar.

Ludwig rose to his feet, gravitating toward him. “What's wrong?”

Feliciano's face twisted, a dark shadow shrouding light and warmth from where it naturally belonged on his face. It suffocated him, wrapped around his neck, like the tail of a snake crawling down his spine and sinking its fangs into the flesh of his gut. All he could do was swallow. “I just wish you didn't have to go,” Feliciano confessed. “I wish this War was over. I wish...” his voice choked off, and finally, he tore his eyes away from the sanctuary and dropped his head.

Ludwig stopped beside him, angling toward the sanctuary. “There was a way we could still be together,” he finished. Feliciano's wet laugh beside him was confirmation of that truth. Ludwig breathed out slowly. “Maybe... maybe there is a way. Maybe not physically. I'd never bring you with me out there, it's... it's nothing you need to see.”

“You forget my lineage, Ludwig,” Feliciano whispered, the weight of an ancient Empire crumbling like dust off his teeth. “I have *seen* war.”

Ludwig nodded, knowing enough not to argue with that. “Still,” he sighed. “We can't stay together all the time. You know we can't.” Again, a confirming silence. “But there was... a scene in the play I told you about. They knew they couldn't be together, but even still, they made a promise to... to be faithful, to wait until the day they could *really* be together, and-”

“Ludwig,” Feliciano turned toward him, reaching out to take his hand. A gentle tug squared Ludwig off to him. Feliciano smiled, eyes glimmering in the candlelight with unshed tears. “Would you like to make a promise like that? Right now?”

Ludwig's breath caught. “I don't... Feli-”

“Please? I think it would make us both feel much better,” Feliciano persisted. “I know it may seem silly, but I want to never forget this. I want to make this promise not as Nations, but just... Feliciano and Ludwig.”

Ludwig exhaled slowly. “Of course.”

Life returned slowly to Feliciano's gaze. “Then,” he cleared his throat, stood straighter, took Ludwig's other hand in his, “Ludwig, I promise that no matter how far you go, or how long you are away, I will wait for you to return. I promise that I will think of you every day. And when you do come back to me, I promise that I will cherish the time we spend together.”

Stunned silent, Ludwig could only gaze back at Feliciano, his mind grasping for words that slipped like water through his fingers.

Feliciano lowered his head, whispering to him despite their lack of audience. “Ludwig, it’s your turn.”

“R-Right,” Ludwig stammered. Shaking his head, he tried to breathe his nerves out. “Uhm... Feliciano, I...” he closed his eyes, “I promise that no matter what it takes, I will come back to you. I promise that... that one day there will be a time for us.” The silence was accompanied only by their soft breaths, mingling inches apart, and the wind's continuous cry outside the cathedral walls. Ludwig opened his eyes again. “Now what?'

Feliciano pursed his lips. “We need something to trade, I think. Hang on.” Letting go of Ludwig's hands, Feliciano dashed away, running out of the nave and through the ambulatory. Before the warmth of his hands faded from Ludwig's palms, he returned, slightly out of breath, with two strings of beads clutched in his fingers. “Here,” he said as he untangled them and passed one to Ludwig.

Ludwig took the beads, smoothing them out in his hands until he recognized the form of a rosary. Made from the compressed petals of real roses, a light floral perfume lifted from the beads. A golden cross hung from the end, laid in with small emeralds. He scowled. “Feliciano, we can't just *take* these.”

“No one will even notice they're gone,” Feliciano insisted. “Come on, we have to trade.”

Though it seemed a little silly to give Feliciano something that he'd given him moments before, and didn't belong to either of them in the first place, Ludwig complied. He gave Feliciano his rosary, and Feliciano gave him his. It wasn't until that second rosary fell into his palm, that he felt the beginnings of sentiment attach itself to the rosary. The two weren’t entirely identical, as he’d first thought, this one laid in with rubies rather than emeralds. Ludwig looked up. Without thinking much of it, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Feliciano's cheek.

He leaned back again. A heartbeat, and then they were both meeting for a kiss, light as wind on a candle. That was all. Feliciano threw his arms around Ludwig's shoulders, rosary dangling from his fingers, and buried his face in his shoulder. Ludwig held him back in a tender embrace.

“Ludwig?” Feliciano whispered into his shoulder after a moment. “That play. Tell me... does it have a happy ending?”

Ludwig held him tighter.

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Germany, Present Day

Ludwig was never late. If there was one certainty, one constant in this world, one single axis upon which the earth had spun around the sun for the past thousand plus years of his life, it was that Ludwig Beilschmidt was never late.

Except, of course, when he was.

Feliciano stood in the Marienplatz at the heart of Munich. The shadow of the Neues Rathaus loomed over the Christmas Market below. Everything always felt so tall here. From the spires of the Gothic hall, to the towering peaks of the centuries old buildings, and the largest

Christmas tree Feliciano was sure he'd ever seen in his life, if not at least the most beautiful. Planting himself at the base of the enormous evergreen, Feliciano adjusted his scarf over his mouth, watching his breath stream out of his mouth in little clouds with mild amusement before wrapping himself up again. Rocking back and forth on his heels, he balanced the colourfully wrapped package under his arm and lifted his wrist to check his watch, pushing back the edge of his mitten. They were supposed to meet here twenty minutes ago.

Feliciano could already smell the mulled wine. The Christmas Market surrounded him, wooden stalls lining the Marienplatz in winding aisles, casting warn light onto the snow dusted cobblestone. It was like every postcard and every ad of the perfect picturesque Christmas scene had been poured out into the ancient city and flooded its streets. Lights strung up between lampposts and rooftops, pine garland wrapped with red ribbon, hand painted and delicately carved ornaments both hanging as decorations and lining the back walls of the wooden huts trying to sell their wares. Musicians and full bands played traditional and classic songs around every corner.

And Feliciano felt it all like the snow drifting down around him; distant, watching it all in slow motion. He checked his watch again – not even two minutes had passed. Maybe Ludwig had forgotten. Maybe he just didn't want to come. Feliciano could hardly blame him. It had been more than a few years since they'd last spent time together outside of official business. How long had it been exactly? A decade? Or more, but Feliciano didn't want to do the math. It would probably only depress him. Not that their relationship had been cold lately, just – strained. When seeing each other at world meetings or other business, they would still great each other warmly, have dinner together, but never alone. They didn't call, didn't text, didn't invite each other over like they used to. It was – awkward wasn't really the right word.

Feliciano didn't know what the right word was, but he knew he probably wouldn’t like it anyway.

The clock towering above the square chimed the hour. Feliciano jumped slightly at the loud gongs, eyes shooting up to the clock. It wasn't too late yet, but the sun had already set. Daylight was bleeding away, leaving the sky indigo and stained with wisps of orange and violet. Maybe this was a bad idea. The self-doubt was a paralytic. He was so nervous he thought his heart might stop cold. Or maybe burn straight through his chest. Maybe both. Feliciano was starting to get rather sick of maybes.

Golden hazel eyes swept the market again, with still no sign of the German. Anxiety grew up his spine like pine needles, sharp and spreading into his neck. So, he wasn't coming after all. Feliciano sighed, the breath catching in his tight throat. He took all of two steps away from the Christmas tree, about to head back to his hotel room for the night, when a muffled voice stopped him.

“Yes, I'm still going down tomorrow. I’m not sure, I haven’t found him yet.” A deep tenor voice spoke. Feli couldn't quite tell where it was coming from. He knew the voice in an instant, recognition pooling liquid gold in his stomach. Feliciano turned in every direction, trying to spot the blond in the crowd.

“No, I do not see him. Maybe he had trouble getting into the city. It was snowing a lot. Well, I do not *know* why he is not here, Gilbert. That would be the problem. It is Feliciano. He is

never punctual. No, I did not get any texts from him. I've already checked. Listen, Gil, let me worry about that, okay? OK. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

Feliciano heard the pause between Ludwig hanging up and his sigh – he was probably about to leave. Trying to think through the mounting fear that he really would miss Ludwig, Feli finally realized that the voice had been coming from behind him. Feliciano turned, racing around to the other side of the tree, only to come skidding to a hault inches away from a pair of eyes that rivaled the snowy dusk sky.

Ludwig's breath clouded from his mouth. Feliciano's lips were clear – he held his breath. It felt like an eternity had passed before Ludwig cleared his throat. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to come," he said.

"I've been waiting on the other side of the tree!" Feliciano laughed (almost too much, he realized with a tinge of embarrassment). "To think we were both waiting for each other in the same place! I guess we really should have checked around the tree. It is pretty big, so it's no wonder we didn't see each other sooner."

"Wait," Ludwig held up a hand before Feliciano could ramble further. "How long have you been waiting here?"

Feliciano glanced up at the clock tower. "About twenty minutes."

Ludwig's mouth curved up at one corner, the kind of smile that was more visible in his eyes. Feliciano's chest ached. "Then you *were* late. We were supposed to meet half an hour ago."

Feliciano shrugged, adjusting the soft white toque on his head. "Ah- I guess I was," he laughed. He found he didn't have to force it. After a beat of silence, he dropped his hand and smiled. "Hello, by the way."

Ludwig shook his head. "Hello, Feliciano," he said. "It's good to see you again. You look... you look well."

Feliciano shifted on his feet. "It's good to see you, too." And Ludwig looked well, he didn't need to say that out loud. He was glowing in the golden light of the tree, upright and sturdy as he'd always been, and those broad shoulders well defined in his grey overcoat, and his eyes, oh they made Feliciano feel like he might melt, and he *really* needed to stop staring. "Oh! Before I forget, I got you something," he stammered. Taking his package out from under his arm, he held it out for Ludwig.

Ludwig took the small box and weighed it in his hands for a moment. "You know, it's not Christmas yet. You didn't have to get me anything."

"I know," Feliciano shrugged. "But we're going to be at Roderich's house together for Christmas anyway, and I couldn't wait. Go on, open it!"

Shaking his head again, Ludwig complied. He pulled the wrapping apart by swiping his forefinger between the seams, splitting the tape and unfolding the foiled paper. Balancing the

box in one hand, he opened the lid of a wooden box to find a set of delicate tools laying in a bed of paper stuffing.

Feliciano rocked on his heels, eagerly looking between Ludwig and the box. “They’re wood carving tools!” he burst when he couldn’t hold in his excitement anymore. “I know you like doing wood carvings - erm, or you used to. I thought you might like them. Do you like them?”

Ludwig picked up a rounded scalpel up by the handle, turning the small blade over in the light. “These are very good quality. I haven’t done any carvings in a while, but I’ve actually been thinking about taking it up again. Thank you.” Setting the tool back down, he closed the box, folded the paper, and tucked it under his arm. With his free hand, he reached into a pocket in the lining of his coat. “I actually have something for you as well.”

Feliciano crossed his arms over his chest and grinned. “You didn’t have to.”

Ludwig let out a single, breathed laugh. “I know,” he said as he took out a thin, rectangular package. “I’m afraid it is not as nice as yours, though.”

Feliciano took the present eagerly, tearing the paper off in his excitement and ignoring the face Ludwig made at the mess. The moment he ripped the paper away, Feliciano stopped cold. His expression softened as he ran his fingertips over the cover of a beautiful copy of *Romeo & Juliet* . The binding was an incredible quality, hand sewn with an embellished cover. The colour was a soft, powder blue. Small gold-leafed stars made up the border. In opposite corners, the outlines of two outstretched hands reached for each other, unable to touch.

Ludwig cleared his throat. “I, erm, remembered that you like the play, and so when I saw the book... if you don’t want it, I have the gift receipt, so you can excha-”

“No!” Feliciano beamed up at him, holding the book close to his chest as he struggled to rein in his emotions. “I... I love it. Thank you.”

“Well, then I’m glad,” Ludwig nodded. As he lifted his head a moment to look around them at the market, Feliciano could almost *see* him trying to think of what to say. “How was your trip here?”

“It was fine,” Feliciano answered. “My flight from Florence was a little delayed because of the snow, but I made it in time to check into my hotel.”

“You booked a hotel?” Ludwig asked. When Feliciano nodded, Ludwig waved his hand. “That isn’t necessary. Stay with me, I have the guest room ready.”

“Oh?” Feliciano couldn’t keep the nervous tremour out of his voice. “I-I don’t want to intrude.”

“You never used to worry about that,” Ludwig said with a bare, knowing smile. The fondness in his tone was almost painful. “It’s not a problem. I insist.”

He couldn’t really “Well, then… thank you,” said Feliciano.

“We can pick up your bags from your hotel later. Would you... like to get dinner first?”

He should have said no. He’d made a royal mess of this in the past. He should have said no, but Feliciano’s head wasn’t going to win this battle. His heart was already out of his reach. “I would love that.”

Straying away from the Marienplatz and down the narrow lanes twisting through Munich, they made their way to a small restaurant hidden away in a gated terrace. Ludwig pulled the iron gate back, guiding Feliciano into a clean little alleyway decorated with juniper branches and twinkling white lights. Apparently, this was the best restaurant in Munich, and Ludwig was, of course, a fairly reliable source. They were lead up to a raised floor overlooking the main street, seated at a table for two by the window. Shifting into the seat, Feliciano peeled himself out of his tan coat, his hat, and his scarf, leaving him in his brown knit sweater. Ludwig did the same, revealing a deep green turtleneck. He’d taken to parting his hair on the left in recent years, rather than straight back like he used to. Still combed and neat, but in a more modern style. It was -

“Feliciano. Feli,” Ludwig tried to call his attention. He nodded his head toward the waiter standing beside their table. “What do you want to drink?”

Feliciano blinked. He hadn’t even looked at the menu yet. “Uh, the house Riesling, please.”

Ludwig nodded, then turning to the waiter to give their order in his natural German. Feli didn’t even bother trying to translate, just listened. He loved the way it sounded, how the vowels were round and the consonants were weighted on the tip of his tongue and warm in his throat. Of course, Feliciano was fluent in German, but he’d always spoke the Austrian dialect. There was something so intimate about listening to Ludwig speak, that Feliciano often found himself listening to the sound of his voice, rather than the words themselves.

After a few moments, the waiter nodded and headed off to the bar, leaving the two of them at their table. The restaurant was nearly empty. Most of Munich seemed to be outside strolling the festive streets. Feliciano rubbed his hands together, still trying to warm up from being out in the cold for so long.

The efficiency of German restaurants never ceased to amaze Feliciano. In short order, they both had their drinks, a 9 oz of Reisling and a pint of Erdinger Kristal, along with their meals, butter sage gnocchi and rouladen. Their conversation was light, broken up by the sounds of cutlery on their plates. This sort of silence was relatively foreign between them.

“So,” Ludwig said as he swallowed a bite. He set his silverware down and looked up at Feliciano. “You aren’t spending this Christmas with your brother?”

“No,” Feliciano shrugged as he pushed a piece of gnocchi around his plate. “We had our own early Christmas yesterday. After I got invited to Roderich’s house, Lovino decided to spend the Holidays with Antonio in Barcelona. I’ll be sure to call him on Christmas Eve, though.”

“Right,” Ludwig said as he brought his fork up with another bite stuck on the prongs. “Still, I was rather surprised that you wanted to come to Munich first to drive with me. It’s more than a little out of the way for you.”

Feliciano laughed nervously. “Well, it’s been so long since I’ve seen the Christmas Markets in Munich, and,” he trailed off, bringing his wine glass to his lips. He took a light sip, finally looking up at Ludwig over the rim. “I guess... I was just feeling a little nostalgic.”

Ludwig stared back at him, holding Feliciano in place with his gaze alone. “Yes, it’s that time of year, I suppose,” he conceded as he brought his pint glass up to his mouth. “For nostalgia.”

Oh, there it was. Feliciano felt a thrill of heat surge through his chest, a slow and gentle roar eating him up inside. He could feel it spreading down his legs, to the tips of his fingers and the crown of his head. All Ludwig had to do was look at him. It really was unfair; how handsome he was in the soft amber light, the way he seemed so entirely unaware of it. Feliciano pursed his lips, a persistent smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Reaching across the table, he clinked the rim of his wine glass against Ludwig’s, before taking another sip. Though the expression was subtle, Ludwig smiled back.

The tension that had spent all evening pulled tight as a bowstring slowly eased, until Feliciano no longer felt like he was one note away from something inside him snapping. They split a piece of chocolate cake after they’d finished their meals, and although there was a small voice in the back of his head screaming *“danger, you’re getting too close”* , Feliciano found it all too easy to ignore it. Maybe it was just the wine. They’d been able to do this before, though, hadn’t they? They’d been able to be just friends. Good friends. Feliciano could be happy with this.

“No, it wasn’t that year,” he argued as he slipped the last piece of cake into his mouth. “The Christmas we spent in Hanover was the year we had the Conference, and the snow was so bad everyone’s flights were delayed, so we just stayed for the holidays.”

Ludwig frowned, leaning comfortably back in his chair. “Ah, yes, you’re right. I was thinking of Seville.”

“No, you’re thinking of Frankfurt, in the 20’s,” Feliciano laughed. “That was the year Gilbert and Erzsé got into an Absinthe drinking contest and we had to stop Gilbert from stealing one of the Wisemen from the Nativity Scene outside Liebfrauen.”

“Right. None of us had noticed that Erzsébet had stolen the Baby Jesus until we found it stuffed inside the Christmas Tree the next morning.” When Ludwig laughed, the sound resonated deep and warm in his chest, a rare and wide smile on his face as he shook his head at the memory. “I don’t know how I could have forgotten.”

“You’ve always been rather forgetful, Ludwig,” Feliciano teased as he finished off the last of his second glass of wine.

Ludwig leaned forward in his seat. “Maybe,” he agreed, “but I never forget the important things.”

It took everything in Feliciano not to choke on his wine. The last drop caught in the back of his throat, and he had to discreetly clear it, covering his mouth with a napkin, before Ludwig could notice. Thankfully, his attention seemed to have been diverted to the waiter, as he brought the bill to their table. Ludwig already had his hand out to take it, but Feliciano grabbed at it before he could set it down on the table.

“Wait, let me pay,” Feliciano said, already slipping his wallet out of his back pocket and setting in on the table.

Ludwig, however, would not let go of the leather folder containing the bill. “No, you are my guest.”

“Exactly,” Feliciano retorted with a light tug. “You are letting me stay with you, saving me from having to pay for a hotel. It’s the least I could do.”

“Feliciano, really, I insist.” With strength on his side, Ludwig managed to easily pull the folder from Feliciano’s grip. Setting it on the table, he reached into his coat pocket, hung over the back of his chair, for his wallet.

Feliciano took the opportunity to wave to a passing waitress. “Don’t take his credit card,” he pointed to Ludwig. “I saw him pick it up off the ground outside, it’s stolen.”

“Feli!” Ludwig sputtered, the tips of his ears turning a charming shade of red. The waitress only laughed as she continued her way back to the kitchen. Still, Ludwig watched her go, sputtering his innocence. Feliciano took the opportunity to take the bill, sliding it closer to him across the table. He didn’t get far, though, before Ludwig realized what he was doing and quickly grabbed it.

This, of course, left them at an impasse. Each of them had one hand on the bill, and neither seemed very willing to give it up. Feliciano couldn’t help but laugh. “Know when you’re defeated, Ludwig,” he taunted.

When Ludwig gazed back at him, that stern glower had warmed into an almost playful smile. “You know me better than that.”

“I do. But,” Feliciano leaned forward. “I’m not afraid to make a scene.”

Ludwig’s gaze narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“You know me better than that,” Feliciano retorted, smile turning devilish, before he shot up. Half out of his chair, half bent over the table, Feliciano managed to yank the bill out of Ludwig’s hands through surprise alone. He waved the black leather folder over his head, as Ludwig grabbed at his other arm to try to pull him back down, with no success. “I *am* taking this bill!” he cried with a dramatic wave of his arm. “ And I want everyone in this fine restaurant to know it! No one is to allow my handsome friend here to pay!”

Mortified by the strange looks they were receiving from the other patrons and staff, Ludwig finally relented. “Feliciano, please!” Ludwig pleaded, letting go of the Italian in his embarrassment.

With no remorse whatsoever, Feliciano too his seat again with a smug smile, slipping his credit card out of his wallet and setting it on the table. When he looked back at Ludwig, he was attempting to glare at him from across the table, but there was no mistaking the amused smile he hid behind the hand over his mouth.

That over with, the bill was paid, and they were free to bundle up and head back out into the city. As Feliciano finished pulling on his coat, he grabbed for his scarf on the far side of the table. He'd nearly forgotten about the precious object wrapped inside until the edge of the scar fell away, revealing the cover of Romeo & Juliet. All the warmth burning in him throughout dinner suddenly vanished.

"We'll stop by your hotel on the way, it can't be far," Ludwig said, completely unaware as he straightened the collar of his overcoat. "There shouldn't be a problem in cancelling for the night. At this time of year, there are plenty of people waiting for a room."

Feliciano nodded, wrapping his scarf around his neck and tucking the book firmly underneath his arm. When he looked back at Ludwig, there was no trace of apprehension on his face. "Let's go, then."

True to Ludwig's word, it didn't take much hassle for Feliciano to collect his bags and get his payment returned at the hotel. From there, the two trudged across the snow heavy streets of Munich to Ludwig's home.

Ludwig lived in a lofty apartment in the old part of the city. Or at least, that was where he lived in Munich. Most Nations had several houses and apartments throughout their countries. If nothing had changed, Ludwig spent most of his time in a lush cabin style home in the foothills near Neuschwanstein. Still, the Munich apartment was familiar. Feliciano felt painfully at home the moment he stepped through the door. The walls were white and clean, without being cold or dull. Ludwig had never been one to care much for decor, pragmatic as he was, but it was still a comfortable living space, with a modern kitchen and a rustic fireplace. It overlooked a tree lined lane, with the spires of the Neues Rathaus rising up in the distance over a sea of white-capped rooftops.

Feliciano set his bags down at the front door as he took his shoes off and hung up his coat. Walking into the flat, he rubbed his hands over his biceps and wandered toward the window. It was snowing harder now, falling snowflakes catching the golden light below like someone had opened up a jar of glitter and sprinkled it over the city. It was so difficult not to be enchanted by it all.

"Well," Ludwig cleared his throat from behind him. The apartment was still dark. "Like I said, the guest room is ready for you. It will take a few minutes for the heat to come back on. There are clean towels in the bathroom if you want to shower. Help yourself to the kitchen. You… must be wanting to get to bed."

Feliciano turned away from the window, walking back to the front door to pick up his bags. "Oh. Yes, I'm very tired. Long day with traveling and all."

"Of course," Ludwig nodded. They were stood only two feet apart, Ludwig at the doorway to the master bedroom, and Feliciano at the guest room. Ludwig coughed. "Well, then.

Goodnight, Feliciano."

Feliciano's chest burned. "Goodnight, Ludwig," he breathed. The two of them lingered for a moment, hesitant, before all at once turning away from each other. Feliciano opened the door to the guest room and walked inside. He set his bags down beside the bed, not bothering to turn on the light. The room was plain, and comfortable, and still in the darkness.

He could stand it for all of two seconds.

Feliciano turned and rushed out of the room. "Ludwig-"

Ludwig was already there. Hands on either side of Feliciano's face, cradling his cheeks in heavy palms, he brought their lips together before either had the chance to breathe. Feliciano's arms wrapped around Ludwig's shoulders, pulling him flush against his chest. The bowstring had snapped. Kissing Ludwig back with so much pent up passion that they both stumbled, Feliciano held onto him like a drowning man to a bouy.

They walked backwards, blind in the dark, until Ludwig's back hit the nearest wall. His hands slipped down from Feliciano's face to settle on his waist, pulling his hips closer. Feliciano gasped, and Ludwig allowed himself to be greedy, slipping his tongue into his mouth with one tentative swipe before Feliciano eagerly met it. The Italian reached down, tugging up at the edges of Ludwig's sweater. Shifting away in wordless understanding, Ludwig let go in favour of pulling the sweater off in one swift motion - or it would have been swift if he hadn't momentarily gotten stuck in the turtleneck. Feliciano laughed breathlessly as he helped Ludwig pull the sweater off and toss it carelessly onto the floor. Met with Ludwig's bare chest, the first thing that came to mind was Michelangelo's David.

Feliciano kissed him again. His hands smoothed over Ludwig's bare abdomen. He could feel every quiver of his muscles, every stutter of Ludwig's breath. Ludwig's hips swayed forward against Feliciano's, stopping both their breathing in one rough gasp. Only few moments of kissing and they were already hard as diamonds. Without breaking the kiss, Feliciano reached down and struggled a moment with Ludwig's belt buckle. The second he managed to get it undone, he pulled down the zipper on Ludwig's trousers and began to kiss his way from the blond's cheek, down his neck, his chest, until he was kneeling on the ground in front of him.

Ludwig's eyes never strayed. Feliciano smiled, a patchwork of golden street lamps and silver moonlight on his face, as he pulled down the hem of Ludwig's pants down just enough to free his cock. Feliciano only had to breathe, and Ludwig twitched. In that moment, Feli wasn't thinking clearly. He wasn't considering the consequences. Only that he missed Ludwig's weight on his tongue. Fingers wrapping around the base, Feliciano kept eye contact as he slipped the head of Ludwig's erection between his lips.

Ludwig's head fell back against the wall. "Feli- *hah,"* he choked off in a gasp as he gently knotted his hand in Feliciano's hair.

This wasn't the first time they'd had sex. Earlier years of intimacy had left them comfortable and responsive to each other. A kind of sex that didn't lose any raw passion just because of familiarity. But years of separation had also left them both needy. Feliciano hollowed out his cheeks and moved his head, taking him in deeper, watching Ludwig's reactions.

There was something intoxicating about watching Ludwig let his guard down. Feliciano liked doing this for him. He liked it when Ludwig messed up his own hair, passing his fingers through the blond locks and gripping it at the roots to ground him. He liked watching him come undone, unreserved. Feliciano swallowed around him a few times before pulling back with a gasp, a string of saliva trailing from his mouth to the weeping tip of Ludwig's arousal. Kissing, languid and wet, along the shaft, Feliciano stroked his fingers along the length. He could only stand to tease Ludwig like that for a few minutes before taking all of him in again. Ludwig thrust gently into Feliciano's mouth and moaned.

Finally, when he couldn't take it any longer without coming there in the hallway, Ludwig pulled Feliciano back up to his feet. He kissed him hard, his hands grabbing onto Feliciano's ass. Feliciano's arms came up around his shoulders again, lifting his right thigh against Ludwig's waist. Ludwig used the leverage to hoist Feliciano up until the Italian could wrap his legs securely around him. Evidently incapable of *not* kissing Feliciano for more than a nano-second at a time, Ludwig stumbled blindly into the master bedroom. He knocked into the dresser along the way, eliciting smoldering laughter from Feliciano. Knees hitting the back of the mattress, Ludwig fell on his back, taking Feliciano down with him.

"You're alright?" Feliciano murmured against Ludwig's cheek.

"Fine," Ludwig answered, hands dipping up under Feliciano's sweater to caress along his hip bones. "But there seems to be a bit of an imbalance here." Feliciano grinned before sitting up to pull the offending sweater off. It gave Ludwig enough time to back up against the pillows on the headboard, Feliciano straddling his waist. With every feverish kiss, Feliciano ground down against Ludwig. The German groaned heavy in his throat as his hand came up to curl into Feli's hair. "You are a *menace,* " he whispered.

Feliciano only smiled devilishly in response. His punishment was Ludwig pulling back from the kiss to drag his teeth over Feli's neck before sucking the skin until sufficiently bruised. A whine scratched its way from his throat. "Lud- *Ludwig* ," he breathed. "Ludwig, do you have anything?"

Ludwig haulted his assault on Feliciano's neck, groaning for a different reason as he pressed his forehead against his shoulder. "Hang on," he muttered before reluctantly untangling himself from beneath Feliciano.

Left alone on the bed so quickly it nearly gave him whiplash, Feliciano took the break to catch his breath. He didn't allow himself to think -- didn't want his head to clear and his conscience to intrude on his libido. Outside the room, Feliciano could hear Ludwig rooting around in search of something. Of course he didn't have real lube, it had been a while, and while Ludwig's sex life was his own business, Feliciano knew that he wasn't one for casual sex. He did feel only slightly guilty for being relieved that Ludwig didn't have lube on hand regardless, though, on the off chance that maybe he'd had a fling or two. Only slightly guilty, anyway. Really, not at all. Listening the rustle of Ludwig's search, Feliciano heard him curse, muffled through the walls, and laughed to himself at Ludwig's frustration. Taking the time to kick out of his trousers, he only had to wait another minute before Ludwig came back with a bottle of olive oil in his hands.

“This is all I have,” he confessed, still red faced and slightly out of breath. “If you don’t want to-”

Feliciano took the bottle from him. “I’m Roman,” he teased. “Besides, it’s funny,” Feli pointed to the label. “Extra Virgin.”

Ludwig blanched for a moment before bursting into deep, hearty laughter. The sound vibrated through Feliciano’s bones like a bell. As Ludwig laid down on the bed again, Feliciano helped him pull off his pants and toss them aside. He straddled his waist once again, shivering at the sound of Ludwig taking the bottle and pouring a bit of oil onto his fingers. His spine electrified as Ludwig’s dry hand kneaded his ass, while the other slowly pushed a lubricated digit into his entrance. Feliciano faultered, breathing out harshly as he adjusted. He kissed Ludwig, open mouthed and heavy, as Ludwig began to finger him. It took all the self control Feliciano had not to move, as their cocks pushed against each other, trapped between their abdomens. Ludwig was always so careful about this, no matter how desperate and eager they’d been moments before. He took it seriously, the thought of causing Feliciano any discomfort completely unacceptable. It was always sweet for Feliciano to look back on, but always torturing in the moment. Ludwig added fingers until Feliciano’s body gave, before finally slipping his fingers out to pour more oil into his palm. He lathered it over his cock, kissing along Feliciano’s neck.

With his arm around Feliciano’s waist, Ludwig carefully flipped them over, laying him down against the pillows. Ludwig then sat up right. Feliciano spread his thighs for him, and Ludwig put his hand under one knee to lift the Italian’s slender leg up over his shoulder. Positioning himself at his entrance, he watched Feliciano carefully, waiting for his nod before slowly pushing the head in. Feliciano gasped, head tilting back into the pillows. Ludwig stilled, against, waiting for Feliciano to relax before pushing himself in all the way. Despite every muscle in his pelvis screaming to thrust, Ludwig didn’t move. He stroked Feliciano’s erection, giving him time to get used to him. With one hand resting against the leg over his shoulder, Ludwig turned his head just enough to kiss languidly along Feliciano’s calve.

Feliciano watched him, all the tender love he poured into this, and was entirely helpless. He pushed his hips up, feeling Ludwig move inside him and brush every so slightly against that sweet bundle of nerves at the base of his spine. He tried to breathe. All that came out was a high pitched moan. Ludwig withdrew himself slowly, and pushed back in, aiming for that spot. Dropping Feliciano’s leg from his shoulder, Ludwig settled over him on his forearms, hands cradling Feliciano’s head. He withdrew and gradually surged in again.

It was a stark contrast to their earlier starvation. Where before they were desperate and impatient, now they took their time. Ludwig was slow, keeping a steady rhythm as he fucked, and Feliciano breathed with his rise and fall. It wasn’t just his cock that had Feliciano scrambling for handfuls of stars. It was Ludwig’s strong thighs meeting against the underside of his with every thrust. It was Ludwig’s hardened abdomen rubbing against his arousal. It was their chests pressed together so closely Feliciano’s heart was trying to beat free of its ribcage just to get closer. It was hands and lips and tongues and teeth.

“Feliciano,” Ludwig groaned, voice cracking. “Feli- *God* .”

It was half senseless at this point, but Feliciano could barely string coherent thoughts together. “More,” he begged. Ludwig continued on his same tantalizing rhythm, unwilling to give in so easily. “Ludwig, I- please , harder, *please* .”

Ludwig pressed their foreheads together, gazing deep enough into Feliciano’s eyes to drag his soul out by the hair. He pulled out, just as gradually as before, only to snap his hips in. Feliciano cried out, head falling back. Ludwig took advantage of his exposed neck to leave another mark as he picked up into a bruising pace. Feliciano’s heart couldn’t keep up any more, lungs burning. Heat pooled in his gut, searing straight through him. Every slap of skin against bare skin pushed another whining moan from Feliciano’s mouth. Feliciano could feel the pores in his forehead opening up, sweat slicking back into his hair.

Feliciano came in a mess of Ludwig’s name. His back arched up, legs tightening around Ludwig’s hips as his body convulsed with every throb of his orgasm. Ludwig reached between them, stroking him off as cum dripped out onto their chests. Not far behind, it only took Ludwig a few moments of feeling Feliciano pulse heat around him to cum spilling out of him. Ludwig moaned into Feliciano’s shoulder, his thrusts peaking and dying out into slow laps as he collapsed on top of him. When Feliciano finally went still, his entire head was so thick with sex, he was hardly aware of anything but his own thunderous heartbeat and Ludwig’s solid weight. By the time he came down from his high, Ludwig was using the corner of the bedsheet to wipe the mess off.

Letting the sheet fall to the side, Ludwig laid himself between Feliciano’s legs with a heavy sigh, pushing his forehead against the soft skin of his stomach. Feliciano, reached down and lovingly carded his fingers through the mess of blond hair. He slicked it back, only to drag his fingertips through it again to fall over his forehead. For a long while, they just watched each other. They just breathed, and that was enough.

Feliciano, absolutely spent, managed a smile. “It’s been a while,” he whispered.

“It has.” Ludwig murmured. Ludwig turned his head enough to press a kiss just above his navel. “Too long, Feliciano...”

Feliciano’s smile faded. “I know.”

Once feeling had returned to their bodies, Ludwig crawled up to the head of the bed and pulled the covers back, allowing them both to slip under. The sheets were cool. Ludwig’s body pressed up against Feliciano’s back was warm. An arm found its way around his waist, and Feliciano held it in place, snuggling back. Ludwig pressed a kiss against the top of Feliciano’s head before drifting off. Serial post-sex sleeper. That much hadn’t changed.

Feliciano wasn’t too far behind. Content in the sweaty afterglow, he drifted off, eyes falling closed until the scent of roses had them snapping open again. It was a light scent, but one that triggered a strong wave of memories. A glint of red light caught his eye as a car’s lights passed below the window.

On Ludwig’s bedside table was a rosary, made with rose scented beads and a golden cross laid in with small rubies.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> I'm editing and posting this from a train on my way to Quebec City with a glass of wine in my hand. There's snow on the ground outside. Holy Shit, it's Christmas.

Ludwig woke up at around five in the morning. The sharp darkness of the world outside his bedroom window had softened. Daylight was still hours away, but the first stains of blue dawn were seeping over the East. It was snowing, flakes building up on the sill and melting as they hit the glass of the window. The world outside was just beginning to yawn into the morning. Ludwig woke up slowly, in absolutely no hurry. It was rare that he woke up at this hour and didn't convince himself to get out of bed and take advantage of the extra time. However, with the warm and slender body curled up next to his, he couldn't find a single reason to move.

They must have shifted in the night. Ludwig was now laying on his back, with Feliciano's face nuzzled against his chest, one hand resting over his heart. Flush against his side, with their bare legs tangled beneath the sheets, Ludwig could feel Feliciano's every soft breath against his skin. He exhaled slowly. Feliciano was softer in sleep. There wasn't a harsh thing about his face, but in sleep every invisible burden he carried through the day lifted. His eyelashes brushed down against his cheek, lips parted with every inhale. Ludwig's face smoothed as he brought up his hand to tenderly cradle Feliciano's cheek and carded his fingers through his hair. Feliciano unconsciously leaned into his hand, letting out a deeper breath with the faintest hint of a sigh, before stilling again.

They used to have this. Ludwig felt like an idiot for not taking the time to pause on mornings like this. When they had slept together, Ludwig would be rolling out of bed as soon as he woke up in the morning. He'd be moving on, making breakfast, getting work done, and fondly chastising Feliciano when he inevitably slept in a few hours longer. Ludwig had been a damned fool, then, for not taking this time to slow down and memorize him.

For years, he'd had only memories tainted with bitter longing to keep him company. Luwdig still didn't know why Feliciano had ended things between them. They had fallen in love slowly over the many years of their friendship, coming to an almost inevitable romance. It'd been *good* . Ludwig was not an overly sentimental man, but he cherished that time like nothing else. And just when they'd become comfortable in their relationship, almost domestic, Feliciano had broken it off. Told him that it wouldn't work out, it wouldn't go anywhere, they were too different, it would be too hard as Nations; Feliciano had given him dozens of reasons, but even still, Ludwig could never *understand* .

After that, it would be a lie to say Ludwig hadn't avoided Feliciano for a long tie. He was curt and polite when they saw each other on official business, unyielding to the ache that resurfaced every time he saw his former lover. Again, Ludwig was practical, found it almost natural to remain professional, but still - it had *hurt* . And it had hurt for a long time.

As the years went on, things did get easier. On more than one occasion, Feliciano had expressed that he truly was sorry, but those interactions were awkward and distant. A meeting here, and conference there, spending time with mutual friends, it had lessened the strain over time. So, when Ludwig had heard that Roderich was planning on hosting Christmas again at his estate, and that Feliciano was going to be there… well, he'd only hoped that he could find some peace, being around him again. He'd never had anticipated *this* . He still didn't know what had changed Feliciano's mind, if anything, but given this second chance, he wasn't going to make the same mistakes he did before. Even if this didn't last.

Ludwig would allow himself to be selfish, and love Feliciano for as long as he'd allow him to.

Tugging the thick duvet up higher over their bodies, Ludwig drank in every sensory detail he could. Feliciano's hair fell in his face as he shifted closer in his sleep. Ludwig brushed the stray auburn locks behind his ear. Pressing a lingering kiss to Feliciano's forehead, Ludwig nuzzled his face against the top of his face and let his eyes drift closed. He would, as always, be the first to wake up and get on with the day, but for now, he was content. A few more hours wouldn't hurt.

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When Feliciano woke up that morning, blinking the last traces of sleep from his heavy eyes, his vision cleared on the rosary sitting on the bedside table. For a long moment, he just lay there on his side, face half buried in the pillow, staring at the old treasure. The sound of movement in the apartment was muffled by the bedroom door and walls. It took him a moment to register the cool sheets and empty space next to him on the bed - right. Ludwig. Scenes of last night trickled back into his memory as his mind caught up with the rest of his body.

Feliciano slowly sat upright, the sheet pooling in his lap and tangling between his legs. Hands curled at the edge of the mattress, he let his head fall between his shoulders, slouching over himself. He wasn't sure how to feel. There was no guilt, no regret. Feliciano knew, in his head, that this was wrong, but it couldn't feel farther from it. Apprehension clouded at the edges of his consciousness, thick as fog drifting down from a mountain top. He didn't want to think about what the others would say. Even still, all he could feel was palpable relief – like he'd been fighting a magnetic pull for years, finally twisted his polar ends and gave in. Feliciano carded his fingers back through his hair and looked around the room. Ludwig had brought his bags inside, and folded his discarded clothes on the dresser. He smiled.

Taking a stack of clean clothes from his suitcase, he headed into the master bath for a shower. Steam still hung in the air and clung to the mirrors. So, Ludwig had already showered, too. Feliciano didn't even question not waking up at the noise. He could sleep through a volcanic eruption. A quick shower (during which he contemplated how pleasantly sore his thighs were) later and he was emerging from the bedroom, changed into slacks and a blue sweater, hair still slightly damp. When he walked out into the clean, white kitchen, Ludwig was setting a bag of apples down onto the counter top, next to a crisply folded spare sheet. He stopped when he looked up to see Feliciano. His elusive smile, seated more in the corners of his eyes than his mouth, had any apprehension Feliciano had been feeling earlier melting away.

"Good morning," Ludwig nodded.

Feliciano sauntered into the kitchen, tossing his arms around Ludwig and rising up on his toes to kiss his cheek. "Boungionro," he chirped, heart fluttering as Ludwig's arm settled around his waist. A kiss on the cheek was apparently not enough. Ludwig kissed his lips, his cheek, and his forehead, eliciting a feather light laugh from Feliciano, before letting go (no one had ever believe him when he's said that Ludwig was rather affectionate).

"There is coffee in the pot if you'd like some. I'm afraid I don't have much for breakfast," Ludwig said as he stepped away to continue working.

Feliciano made a dissatisfied face. "I don't like your coffee."

"I know," Ludwig shook his head. "That's why I got the kind you like."

Walking over to the coffee maker, Feliciano picked up the bag of coffee grounds, turning it over in his hands to find the familiar label of his favouite Italian brand. Feliciano turned around, leaning back against the counter. He waved the bag at Ludwig. "Did you buy this just assuming I'd stay over?" he teased. "Ludwig Beilschmidt were you *planning* to woo me into your bed this whole time?"

Ludwig's ears turned red. "I-I wasn't planning anything, I just - I knew we would be meeting here this morning, at the very least, and you're particular about coffee, so I-"

Feliciano held in his amusement until he couldn't stand it, bursting into laughter. Ludwig was so easily embarrassed, it was rather cruel of him to tease him so much. It was just so endlessly endearing to see such a large and intimidating man crumble into flustered stammering. Feliciano couldn't help himself. "I've got my eye on you, Ludwig," he teased. Turning back to the coffee pot, he took a mug down from the cupboard and poured himself a steaming cup.

Ludwig chuckled under his breath. "I should hope so."

Feliciano didn't reply. Their eyes caught for a moment with knowing smiles. After pouring his usual dose of cream and sugar into his coffee, Feliciano hopped up onto the counter to watch Ludwig. He had a towel tossed over his shoulder as he sifted bread flour into a bowl. His hair was still undone, pushed back slightly out of habit of combing his hands through it

with stray locks falling over his forehead. Feliciano allowed himself to indulge in staring as he took a sip of his coffee. “What are you making?”

“Apfelstrudel,” Ludwig replied. “Roderich asked me to bring a dessert for dinner tonight.”

“An Austrian dessert, Ludwig?” Feliciano grinned. “Oh, I’m going to tell the Chancellor on you.” He was rewarded for the comment with a dishrag tossed at him. Feliciano giggled shamelessly as he caught it, setting it aside in favour of looking over Ludwig’s shoulder. “Can I help?”

Ludwig glanced at him from the corner of his eyes before nodding his head toward the bag of apples. “Peel and cut those."

Feliciano hopped off the counter, setting his coffee down beside the cutting board Ludwig already had out. He was a methodical baker, always had every ingredient and tool that he needed out and ready before he started. Picking up the first apple, Feliciano took the peeler and began to scrape the skin away in twirling ribbons. “I’m so excited to go back to Roderich’s old house,” Feliciano commented as he worked. “I lived there for so long when I was little, it’s really beautiful and even though I was technically Roderich’s underling, I didn’t mind all the time, so I have a lot of happy memories there. Especially around Christmas because the mountains are all covered in snow and you can see Hohensalzburg Castle on the other side of the valley. Oh, Ludwig, while we’re there, we should go to the Christmas markets in Salzburg! Or maybe we could save that for New Years, and visit the one in Sankt Sergius. They’re a lot smaller than the ones here in Salzburg or Munich, but they’re so quaint and pretty, I think you’d love them. We can drink mulled wine and walk in the snow, and there’s always nice music playing, of course, because it’s Austria.”

“We’ll be sure to go, then,” Ludwig said. He was always perfectly content to listen to Feliciano ramble about whatever came to mind, only seldom adding his own comments. “We could stop by the bakery while we are out.”

Feliciano gazed up at him. “Which one?”

“The one up on the side of the mountain, near Roderich’s estate,” Ludwig answered.

Feliciano’s hands paused on the apple, skin slipping out of the peeler as the blade fell harmlessly against his thumb. He dropped his eyes, biting the inside of his cheek. “There is no bakery there, Ludwig,” he replied. It wasn’t entirely a lie. There wasn’t a bakery up there, not anymore anyway. It had burned down in 1783. Sad, too, because at the time it had been the oldest bakery in Austria, run through a family line. They made the best hausbrot. He and Erzsébet used to stop there on their way home from Mass to buy some. “Maybe you’re confused with somewhere else?”

Ludwig’s brow furrowed. “I could have sworn-”

“We can still find a bakery in town! I’m sure Roderich would love having some fresh bread,” Feliciano chattered away as he continued peeling again. “We’ll get hausbrot. He can be so picky about his food.”

Ludwig nudged him with his elbow. “You’re one to talk.”

Feeling a little childish, Feliciano stuck his tongue out at him. “So then I know what I’m talking about,” he retorted.

In short order, he had the apples peeled, cored, and cut into small pieces. Using the dull end of the knife, he dropped the slices into a bowl Ludwig had set aside for him, and turned to Ludwig for further instructions. Ludwig then handed him the pre-measured sugar, cinnamon, and raisins. While he mixed that, Ludwig zested and squeezed a lemon, and Feliciano had to admit that he got more than a little distracted, watching Ludwig’s strong hands work. In any case, the filling was soon finished. Feliciano covered it in plastic wrap and set it aside. By the time he’d set it in the fridge, Ludwig was turning his dough out onto a floured cutting board.

“What now?” Feliciano asked.

“We have to kneed and pound the dough,” Ludwig explained as he floured his hands as well, “so that when we stretch it out, it will be strong enough to hold together without tearing.” Picking up the dough, Ludwig rolled it between his palms a few times before slamming it down on the cutting board. He continued on like that, kneading, pulling, and pounding the dough until it was smooth and rounded. Feliciano watched, more interested in Ludwig’s rolled up sleeves and the muscles working in his forearms than in the baking lesson. Ludwig glanced up at him, once again rolling the dough in his hands. “Do you want to try?” he asked.

“No, no, you go ahead,” Feliciano replied with a dreamy smile.

Ludwig didn’t seem to get it, but didn’t question Feliciano’s infatuation with watching him knead dough. In any case, once he was satisfied with it, he set it aside to rest for thirty minutes. Feliciano let Ludwig take him through the rest of the process, which included using the bed sheet to roll the thinned dough into layers after they poured out the filling. In all honesty, he wasn’t really paying attention. He’d had Ludwig’s baked goods before, knew that the man, strong and intimidating as he was, was a master at making delicate desserts. It was, to excuse the pun, one of the sweetest things about him. But, if Feliciano ever wanted the recipe, he’d probably just ask Ludwig to make it for him. Feliciano was really only in it to watch his soft concentration up close.

It was about noon by the time they were finished. Feliciano didn’t have anything to pack, with all his clothes still in his bags, so he did Ludwig the favour of throwing his bedding into the wash while Ludwig got ready to go. Despite his endless and enthusiastic chatter earlier, he didn’t mind silence. Not between them, anyway. Feliciano thought it over as he put the damp bedding into the dryer. It was comfortable. He had missed it. That notion kept coming up, and every time he allowed himself to soak in that longing for lost time, there came with it the voice in the back of his head telling him that he needed to stop this before it got any further. That he was being selfish.

He’d been quite happy to tell that voice to shut up until this point, but the longer he ignored it the louder it got. As Feliciano remade the bed, he finally had to acknowledge it. He caught his reflection in Ludwig’s bedroom window, the soft bruises on the side of his neck, and realized fully for the first time how *stupid* he was. The reflection of the rosary on the nightstand behind him loomed over his shoulder in the window, a spectral witness to his

crimes the night before. God, he really had done it this time, hadn't he? Feliciano shook his head, taking in a deep breath and closing his eyes as he let it out through his nose.

When he opened his eyes, his attention was drawn straight back to the rosary. Regardless of his own mistakes and feelings, he had to get rid of it. Allowing Ludwig to keep it was too risky. Checking over his shoulder to make sure Ludwig didn't see, he snatched it off the nightstand and hurried across the room to stuff it into the bottom of his suitcase. By the time Ludwig passed by the bedroom door after taking the strudel out of the oven, Feliciano was already back to remaking the bed as if nothing had happened.

"How far is it to Roderich's house from here?" Feliciano asked later that afternoon as they loaded up Ludwig's car.

Ludwig grunted as he shut the trunk. "At this time of year? Probably about two hours at best, maybe a little longer depending on the snow around the mountains."

"That's not so bad!" Feliciano chirped as he rounded the car to the passenger side. "It will be fun, we haven't gone on a road trip in so long. We could play car games, or listen to the radio, or sing ourselves –"

"The radio is fine," Ludwig replied. Quickly. Sliding into the driver's seat, he turned the car on and allowed it to heat up for a few minutes before heading out onto the road. Getting out of the city was never easy, especially since Ludwig lived in the old heart of Munich, but he navigated the roads with practiced ease. "Do you know who else will be there?" he asked. "I know that Erzsé and Gilbert are going, but I wasn't too sure about anyone else."

Feliciano settled into his seat, shifting down to get comfortable and just barely restraining himself from putting his knees up on the dashboard. Ludwig always hated that. "Um, I think Roderich mentioned that Vash and Lili might stop by, but I don't think they were planning to stay. Other than that, I believe Roderich invited some of the old Kingdoms, but they rarely show up."

"It would be nice if they did," Ludwig nodded. "I haven't seen them in ages."

That was common enough. When nations ceased to exist, often times the Nation themselves slowly became human as a result, aging over time. That was the case with the few Kingdoms still alive, but it wasn't always a guarantee. Gilbert, for example, became the representative of East Germany, and was otherwise too stubborn to disappear. Nothing was set in stone. Sometimes, a Nation died and their country survived for centuries afterwards until its gradual downfall as a result. Feliciano leaned his head against the freezing cold glass of the window. Munich rolled by as they headed onto the highway. He bit the inside of his cheek. Nothing was ever set in stone.

"Oh, Ludwig!" he sat up, throwing on a perky facade. His voice sounded forced even to him. "I noticed you had that beautiful rosary on your bedside table. It's gorgeous, where did you get it?"

"That?" Ludwig asked. "Oh, I found it while I was helping Gilbert clean out his basement in Berlin. He's accumulated too much junk over the years. I found it in a box with my name on

it. I don't remember ever seeing it before, though. I suppose it was a gift from a long time ago."

Well, it wasn't far from the truth. Feliciano shifted in his seat. "You're not very religious though. Why did you keep it?"

Ludwig shrugged. "I'm not sure, to be honest," he replied.

"Right... does Gilbert know you took it?"

Ludwig cast a glance at Feliciano out of the corner of his eyes, just for a fleeting moment before looking back at the road. "He didn't have any problem with me keeping the box," he answered. "I don't think what was inside of it mattered. It had my name on it, after all. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious!" Feliciano smiled. "It was just- it's a very pretty rosary, is all."

"Okay," Ludwig nodded warily.

Feliciano pursed his lips. Shifting back down his seat, he took up his place leaning against the cool window. They were just making it out of the city now, heading onto the highway toward the Austrian border. After several moments of silence, Ludwig reached out to turn the radio on. Christmas music played softly through the car, muted over the rumbling of the engine and the whir of passing cars.

"Feliciano," Ludwig began slowly. "We should... probably talk about what happened last night. About where we stand. I... Feli?"

Feliciano pretended to be asleep. Perhaps it was a horrible thing to do, but he panicked. Eyes closed, he heard Ludwig's soft sigh, and felt his warm hand brush tenderly over his forearm before returning to the steering wheel.

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Considering the weather, they made fair time. It was snowing lightly, dusting over the roads, but not bad enough to cause too much issue. Feliciano's feigned sleep had soon after faded into a real nap. By the time he woke up, they were driving through the mountains, leviathan peaks looming overhead, partially blocked out by clouds. Ludwig, thankfully, didn't try to bring up their current relationship status again. The drive passed in idle conversation mostly carried on by Feliciano, broken up by companionable silence. The only traffic they hit was at the border, where the line up to get past the checkpoint was backed up for about fifteen minutes. The moment they made it into Austria, however, the roads were once again clear.

Just Southeast of Salzburg, hidden in the mountains, there were the remnants of an old medieval village. Well, village was being generous. Buildings of brick and cobblestone crumbled away under ivy vines, weathered down and rough from years of neglect. Feliciano

could just barely see it, sitting high up between two mountain peaks. He stared up at it as they passed, catching glimpses through low hanging clouds. It was small, had been small even centuries ago when he remembered it as a quiet but busy little town. Over the years, its charm had turned from quaint to haunting. The gothic spires of the cathedral sitting at the epicenter of it all still loomed down the mountain. They passed it along the highway at the foot of the mountains. Feliciano, for a single moment, felt like a boy again, overwhelmed by its holy presence.

Not long after they'd passed rounded the mountain, they passed through the town of Sankt Sergius. Ludwig steered the car off the main road and onto a series of narrow backroads leading up the other side of the mountain. It was a smaller summit, easier to access by all means than the medieval village. Nestled comfortably just below the peak of the mountain was one of the strangest houses in Austria. It was a mansion in its own right, sitting in a massive and remote estate overlooking the valley. The architecture was a chimera of different styles and ages, spanning over centuries. The oddest thing was that each style worked together, like it'd been overseen with one elegant and simple aesthetic in mind. Most likely, of course, because it was.

The car rolled down the narrow lane, past frosted topiary and black pines, before finally stopping at a stable that had been converted into a sort of garage. There were already several other cars there. Still, Ludwig found a spot easily. Feliciano hopped out of the car with a long stretch, shaking off the stiffness of the long drive. They'd barely gotten their bags out of the trunk of the car before an elated shout and hurried footfall rushed toward them from outside.

Feliciano turned at the sound of a loud clatter, barely catching sight of Erzsébet Hedervery before she was throwing her arms around him. He stumbled back, nearly knocked off his feet. It took a moment to recover from the shock, but he was soon after returning the embrace with equal enthusiasm. "Ciao, Erzsé!" he laughed, the sound squeezed out of him.

"I'm so glad you made it!" Erzsébet cheered as she kissed Feliciano's cheek. Her voice lilted as she spoke in German, the Austrian arranged around her own Hungarian accent. Feliciano had always found her accent beautiful. Finally letting the younger man breathe, she let go and stepped back. Her eyes swept behind him to the car and the baggage at Feliciano's feet. "Gilbert told me you two were travelling here together."

"I wanted to see the Christmas Markets in Munich," Feliciano replied quickly. His own German was similar, his Italian peeking through the Austrian dialect, but he spoke like it was second nature. Ludwig had always teased him about his favouring Austrian German. "It's been so long since I visited, so I thought I'd go out of my way a bit before coming here."

Erzsé, though she did give Feliciano a curious second glance, didn't press the matter. Didn't seem bothered to, anyway. Turning her affection toward Ludwig, she lifted herself up on her toes enough to give him a quick hug. "I hope the roads weren't too bad. The weather didn't give you much trouble?"

"None at all," Ludwig replied as he wrapped an arm around her back, suitcase still in hand. "It only just started snowing hard as we came up the hill."

Erzsébet nodded as she stepped back with a kiss to the German's cheek as well. Leaving them to finish gathering their things, she jogged over to the snow dusted entrance of the stable, where she's dropped a canvas bag full of firewood when she'd seen them inside. A few spare pieces had tumbled out, so she swept them into the bag before hauling it over her shoulder. Erzsé still kept her hair long, but she'd taken to shaving an undercut in recent years, shown off when she had her hair pulled up like this. "Come on, I'll bring you in."

They followed Erzsé inside, footsteps crunching over frozen grass and freshly fallen snow. The heavier snowfall was still to come, but the estate was still picturesque and brushed with white. Despite everything he'd gone through here, what he'd risked to gain his independence with his brother and separate from Austria, Feliciano still considered his place his childhood home. The darker memories, though leaving a sour taste on his tongue, didn't outweigh the good – and there had been good memories. The lasting effect was a haunted feeling as Feliciano stepped through the side door into the old servant's kitchen. The room was wide and smelled of dust and aged wood. It was still left as it had been centuries ago, with soot crawling up the mouth of the brownstone hearth and cast iron cookware hanging from hooks on the walls.

Feliciano, as he always did when he visited, instantly thought the room felt smaller than he remembered, as if he'd stepped back in time and found the details of his memories just slightly off. Then, Erzsé flicked a switch on the wall, and the room was washed in an electric glow from the ceiling lights, and Feliciano felt more like he was walking through a rip in time. The clatter of firewood falling shook off the eerie feeling. Feliciano realized that he'd been standing in the doorway staring for too long. Ludwig was already ahead of him, taking off his boots, and Erzsébet was dumping her bag into a trough now overflowing with chopped logs. Feliciano quickly closed the door behind him, slipping out of his boots before following them through the kitchen and out into the narrow halls of the servant's quarters.

As they walked further into the house, a muddled hint of sound seeped through the walls, distant voices and noise that Feliciano couldn't quite make out. Evidently, they weren't the first ones here.

"Gilbert is already here, and so are Vash and Lili, but they're only staying for tonight. Afraid you missed Felix and Toris, they just left last night, but they didn't stay too long either. I've got you two in the guest rooms right above the new kitchen, so heating shouldn't be a problem, but there are extra blankets in the linen closet down the hall if it's too cold," Erzsé explained as she guided them up a narrow, winding staircase. They came out through a plain door that blended in with the molding and wallpaper, and into a wide, ornate hallway. "God knows I can never get Roderich to turn the central heating up enough," she laughed. Stopping in front of a door on the left side of the hall, Erzsé pushed it open and gestured inside. "Ludwig, this one is yours. Feliciano, I know you like having a view of the valley, so you're down the hall."

Feliciano could see the exact moment Ludwig glanced between his bedroom and the adjacent door, and was about to open his mouth to deem it unnecessary. Without Erzsé noticing, Feliciano nudged him lightly in the side with his elbow, flashing him a knowing smirk from the corner of his eyes. Separate Bedrooms. Probably for the best.

Ludwig cleared his throat, mirroring Feliciano's glance with a phantom smile. "This is just perfect, thank you," he replied as he picked up his suitcase and carried it inside the room.

"I'll let you get settled," Erzsé said. Turning down the hall, she headed toward the main staircase, pausing with her hand on the rail. "Everyone's down in the parlour when you're ready." With that, she disappeared around the bend, heading down the stairs and leaving Feliciano and Ludwig alone by the bedrooms – something that Feliciano was suddenly *very* much aware of.

Nerves coiling deep in the pit of his gut, Feliciano picked up his bags again, adjusting the strap of his carrier bag over his shoulder. "Well, like she said! Getting settled. I'll see you downstairs," he rushed out before Ludwig could say a word. He didn't look back as he headed down the hall toward the bedroom Erzsé had pointed him towards – he didn't dare to. He slipped inside the room, closing the door behind him a bit quicker than necessary. It wasn't until he'd set his bags down and fallen backwards onto the mattress that he heard Ludwig's door down the hallway close.

Feliciano didn't think about how stupid he was being. He didn't think about how dangerous this was, or how selfish he was behaving in entertaining his affections for Ludwig. He didn't about how he was playing with fire, that he was well on his way to breaking Ludwig's heart again, and he'd never forgive himself for that – he'd never forgiven himself for the first time. He banished any thought of how the others would react if they found out what had happened the night before, what they would say, what they would think of him. He didn't think of any of it, and any time one of those insidious thoughts crept up his spine and dug its claws into the back of his head, Feliciano fought them back. Being in this old house again was bringing up antique sentiments again. That was all. This was what Feliciano told himself. He'd been perfectly happy this morning in Munich to allow himself to indulge in his feelings.

Now... maybe he wasn't so sure.

He laid there on the bed for God only knew how long. At least, he stayed there until his heart stopped flushing heat through his chest. All the while he stared up at the white washed ceiling, tracing the crown moldings with his eyes. The room was familiar enough, with its ornate furniture and the remnants of a stove pipe running from room to room for heating. Despite the changes to the old estate over the years, Feliciano could still sleep walk through the halls and get to where he wanted to be. This guest room had been remodeled a dozen times over the years, but he still felt as if he were walking into a part of his childhood home. Feliciano let his head fall to the side on the mattress, gazing out the window.

As Erzsé had promised, the room had a view of the valley dropping down the mountainside and rising up again into the larger peaks on the other side. If he strained to the side of the window, he could even spot the summit of this mountain, towering over the house. From there, Feliciano could just barely see the spires of the Cathedral and the ruins of the town that had once surrounded it. The town itself still existed, or parts of it at the very least, lying in the basin of the valley below where it was easier to rebuild after years of war. Feliciano could see it all from that vantage point – but it wasn't the exact view that he'd remembered from his past.

Eventually, he did figure that it was best to join the others. It would only look suspicious if he locked himself up in his room the moment he arrived, and he really did look forward to seeing friends. Pushing himself up, Feliciano finally slipped out of his coat and scarf before venturing out into the hall. The door to Ludwig's room was open, and upon peaking inside he saw that the German had already gone downstairs. Feliciano lingered a moment in the doorway of the vacant room before making his way toward the stairs – but that was here he stopped. The entrance to the servants' stairwell was still slightly ajar, a sliver of shadow cutting through the wallpaper. A cool draft whispered through the crack. Feliciano spared one glance down the main stairs, before turning on his heel and allowing himself to wander.

That notion came up again – about being able to walk through this house in his sleep. Feliciano felt as if he were stepping through a dream when he reached the top of the servants' stairwell. The hallway up there was plain in comparison to the rugs and paintings and wallpaper of the floors below. It was minimal, pragmatic, with narrow passages and simple doors leading to simpler rooms. Feliciano felt along the rough stone walls as he passed down the hall. This was the oldest part of the estate by far, of the wings that had survived time in any case. At the end of the hall, Feliciano's childhood bedroom still sat undisturbed with the door open, waiting for him to return.

He pushed the door open, hinges whining and stiff, and stepped inside. Feliciano wasn't really sure what he had expected to feel, honestly. The nostalgia was potent, of course, but whether it was positive or negative wasn't really a factor. A strange sort of neutrality washed over him as he stopped in the centre of the room. The walls were angled into the steeple of the roof, with a thin section jutting out for the window. A small window seat with decaying upholstery sat underneath the dust-coated sill. Outside, he could see the vast basin of the valley sweeping upward into the towering mountains, all at a higher angle. The slightest detail made all the difference. This was the view he remembered.

Feliciano turned in a slow circle, tracing the room from memory. There was very little of him left in there – understandable, of course. It'd been nearly two centuries since he'd lived with Roderich, and longer still since he'd stayed in this room. As he'd outgrown the small space, Roderich had given him a bigger bedroom on the second floor (in a wing that had been unfortunately lost in the first World War). However, for the majority of his time under Austrian Rule, this tiny room had been the one place that was, in a loose sense, his. He'd spent most of his life in Italy, as a necessity of his existence as a Nation, but this had always been the place he'd inevitably turned to. All of his old clothes were long since gone, along with most of his belongings, but there were a few spare pieces of himself left behind. There was the scratch on the wall he'd tried to hide with his chest of drawers so he wouldn't get in trouble, the wooden candlestick on the side table that he'd carved a daffodil into, and…

Feliciano knelt down in front of the bench under the single window. He took hold of the seat, and lifted it up with a grunt until he managed to force it off. A cloud of foul smelling dust burst out, and Feliciano turned his head to cough as he set the bench top down beside him. As the acrid scent faded, a sweeter, floral scent took its place – roses. Underneath the bench was a hollow space Feliciano had used for storage, to hide anything he didn't want the older Nations to find. There wasn't much left inside. He'd taken most of his treasures to his new bedroom when he'd moved downstairs, but there had been one thing he'd left behind.

A delicate little wooden box sat at the bottom of the hollow pit. Feliciano hadn't touched it in centuries now, the very thought of disturbing it too painful to dwell on. Now, sentiment overpowered him. Feliciano reached inside and plucked the box from its resting place. A pristine imprint was left behind in the dust. Sparing a glance over his shoulder to be sure no one was watching him, Feli carefully removed the brass latch and opened the box. Sitting inside was his rosary, nearly identical to the one sitting on Ludwig's bedside table in Munich. Feliciano reached out, willing his fingertips not to tremble as they brushed over the rose scented beads. The emerald decorations on the crucifix were dull, but managed to catch the winter light from the window to show that there was still some life left in them.

The sound of music reverberated through the walls. Feliciano stopped with a curious frown, closing the box and returning it to its home. The muffled noises he'd heard earlier were clearer up in the heights of the old mansion. He could just barely pick out the solid melody of a piano accompanied by the high whistle of a wind instrument. Setting the box down and fixing the bench back in its place, Feliciano stood and hurried down the hallway and the tight stairwell. The further down he went, the louder the music grew. Feliciano followed it down to the first floor and through the corridors of the mansion – until the music abruptly stopped. He didn't have much time to mourn its loss, though. Frustrated shouting soon after took its place.

"You're off key again!"

"My key isn't the problem, you just haven't tuned this damn piano in two centuries! Besides, I'm not the one changing the tempo every five seconds."

"The tempo changes are cited in the music, it's not my fault you can't keep up!"

Feliciano chased after the arguing, smile bursting as he rounded the corner into the parlour, where the other Nations were already settled in. The room was small without being crowded, just enough for the fireplace's warmth to be able to reach every wall. Garland and Christmas lights lined the mantel above the fireplace, and an elegantly decorated tree stood in the bay at the corner of the room. However, as picturesque and cozy as the parlour itself was, the scene inside was a little more… hostile.

Roderich sat at the piano bench, glaring up at Gilbert, who was pointing at him with a glistening silver flute as if he were one moment away from bludgeoning him with it. Thankfully, Feliciano's appearance put a hault on that. Erzsébet was already cozied up on the chaise next to Lili, with a blanket draped over her lap and the younger girl's. She glanced Feliciano's way when he came in, smiling and rolling her eyes at the antics of their current musicians. Vash was sitting in an armchair across from them, holding a glass of Schnapps on the rocks and looking as if he were two seconds from hurling it at the bickering duo. In the other corner, Ludwig was kneeling by the hearth, using a cast iron prod to rearrange the logs and add new ones to keep the fire going. Turning slightly over his shoulder, he caught Feliciano's gaze with an unreadable look. Feliciano had to tear his eyes away before he started blushing.

"Feliciano," Roderich smiled as he pushed off the piano bench and crossed the room. It was clear from the way he extended his arm that he'd been offering to shake his hand, but Feliciano threw his arms around the Austrian anyway. Really, he should have known better, and by the way Roderich stumbled and laughed, he knew that too. "It's good to see you."

“It’s good to see you too!” Feliciano chirped. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever! I mean, I know I just saw you a few months ago at the last EU meeting but still!”

“Yes, yes, I’ve missed you too,” Roderich shook his head as he finally peeled himself away.

A throat clearing across the room drew Feliciano’s attention. Gilbert had set his flute aside on the top of the piano, standing with his arms out and a grin on his face. “You can’t keep a man waiting, Feli.”

And true to form, Feliciano didn’t make Gilbert wait another moment. Bounding across the room, he practically leapt at the man, and Gilbert was more than ready to catch him. He gave Feliciano a pat on the shoulder, laughing along with him before letting go – while Gilbert was slightly more affectionate than the others, he was still a German through and through. Ergo, not one for prolonged hugging. However, he’d always seemed to make an exception for the Italian.

“Well, thank God you’re here, Feliciano,” Roderich said as he returned to his piano bench. Even in casual slacks and a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, he moved with all the grace of a concert pianist playing for the masses. “I didn’t think I could last another second playing alone with Gilbert. Care to join us?” As he settled back in his place, Roderich gestured over to the side of the room, where he kept a vast assortment of instruments in a grand wooden shelf. Sitting on a low shelf, coated in a modest layer of dust, was a black leather case.

Feliciano’s smile grew even more vibrant. One could never expect to live under Austria’s rule and not learn some sort of instrument. Gilbert was already smiling back at him, picking up his flute and leaning against the piano. Well, Feliciano didn’t need more invitation than that. He hurried over to the case and took out a beautifully polished violin and bow. With the violin snug under his chin, Feliciano expertly tuned and inspected the instrument as he walked back toward the piano. When he looked up from the strings, Ludwig’s eyes were on him.

“I haven’t heard you play in ages, Feliciano,” Ludwig commented. The firelight was flicking over the side of his face, softening his features. Feliciano felt warmth from the crown of his head flushing down his shoulders at the weight in his gaze. Ludwig smiled, all warmth and ease as he stood from the hearth. He dusted off his hands, and sat down to recline on the sofa, the picture of comfort in a grey wool sweater. “I am looking forward to it.”

“Thank you…” Feliciano could only smile back at him, caught in his own longing. He realized too late that Erzsébet was looking at two of them with the edges of suspicion. Feliciano was quick to focus back on his violin. “Ah- um, what were we playing?”

Roderich reached for his song-book, flipping through a few pages before setting it back above the keys and smoothing the pages out. “How about this one?”

Feliciano peaked over his shoulder. Colombier’s *Emmanuel* . A newer piece, but Feliciano felt his heart swell as he nodded enthusiastically. Gilbert walked around the piano to see which piece they’d picked out, sticking by the bench so he could read the music for the Wind’s part. In contrast, Feliciano rarely read music when he played, something that had

been endlessly infuriating to Roderich when he'd been tutoring him centuries ago. That much hadn't changed. As Feliciano pulled the bow across the string, the sound bloomed from a low vibrato into a high croon, and his feet swayed along with the music. Roderich accompanied, and Gilbert played the harmonies with the airy tones of his flute.

The dulcet, romantic tones of the music carried through the room and bled out into the corridors beyond. Feliciano hadn't played the violin in a while, but it made no difference. His fingers were delicate where they needed to be and firm when required. He didn't dare open his eyes throughout the entire song – he could feel Ludwig's gaze burning into him, and knew that one look would incinerate. That longing fueled him on. The music finished, and finally Feliciano didn't have the excuse of focus to avoid Ludwig's gaze. He lowered his violin slowly, opening his eyes to find entranced blues staring back at him. Feliciano felt the heat from the hearth burn up all the oxygen left in his lungs.

"That was beautiful!" Lili cheered from the chaise, as she topped up her glass of wine. "Oh, you should play *Silent Night* next."

"Well, let the man have a drink first, Lili, he only just got here," Vash retorted.

Ducking her head as her cheeks tinted pink, Lily laughed and offered the bottle she was holding to Feliciano. "Ah, sorry! Would you like some?"

Erzsébet took the bottle from Lili before Feliciano could answer, filling up the rest of her glass to the rim. "You wouldn't like this one, Feli. I brought a bottle of Amarone with me. Ludwig! Be useful and pour our Concertist a glass, won't you?" she said with a cheeky wink at the blond.

With a wry look back at her, Ludwig complied and crossed the room over to a brass cart under the window, where an assortment of bottles and glasses were waiting. Ludwig poured two glasses, passing one off to Feliciano as he passed. "That really was quite good," Ludwig commented. Feliciano took the wine from him, their fingers brushing over the glass for a lingering moment. When Feliciano found himself staring back at him too long, he quickly looked away and pulled his hand back, awkwardly whispering his thanks as he took a sip.

Gilbert took a swipe at Ludwig's shoulder with the back of his hand as the younger brother passed. "And what were we, huh? The chorus dancers?"

"With your legs?" Vash rolled his eyes as he muttered over his glass.

Gilbert's following retort that he had *incredible* calves, thank you very much, was lost to Feliciano over the ringing in his own ears. As Ludwig sat down again, Feliciano caught his gaze, and the subtle smile as he silently lifted his glass. Feliciano smiled back at him, and realized too late that Erzsé's gaze was flickering between the two of them. Feliciano quickly tore his gaze away, pretending to listen to Roderich and Gilbert bicker about what they wanted to play next.

The evening went on with Schubert and Chopin, a picturesque scene of music and wine and snow falling steadily outside. Feliciano couldn't remember the last time he'd felt his anxious. He was bursting with nervous energy that he couldn't contain. Playing the violin could only

distract him so much, though he poured himself into every trilling note. Through-out the passing hours, he found himself gravitating toward Ludwig, and having to force himself to keep his distance, hyper aware of everyone in the room. If they found out what had happened…

It had long since gotten dark outside, with the moon glowing crisp white down the valley. They'd been in the middle of playing a Czardas, and Feliciano had been unable to resist putting down his violin and taking Erzsé's hand to dance. Poor Lili got swept up into it before she could even set her wine down, but the laughter from the girl as Feliciano spun her around on the living room rug was brilliant. Over time, Feliciano found himself able to relax a bit – but then he'd catch Ludwig's eye for too long, and that subconscious pull toward him tightened like a violin string snapping in his chest.

Thing wound down for the evening eventually. Roderich had made Tafelspitz, and they all gathered in the dining room to eat. Feliciano set the table (under threat of Erzsé whacking him with a dish towel for being rude), Roderich brought out the food, and all together it felt *normal* – like any other gathering of friends and family for the holidays. Nevermind what they really were. It wasn't quite a reunion of the old Empire, or of the German speaking nations, no label quite fit right. That wasn't the point. They were some of the few beings alive that shared the same immortal experience, and no matter what had transpired between them all in the past, there was a sort of kinship in that.

Soon enough, the meal was finished, the Nations devoured Ludwig's dessert, and Feliciano hadn't been aware of just how quiet and hyper-aware of Ludwig he'd been all night until Erzsé called his name. He nearly jumped out of his skin. Head whipping around, he stared at her with all the wide-eyed doom of a deer in headlights.

"Feli," Erzsé repeated with a light laugh at having startled him. "Would you mind helping me wash up?"

"Oh! Yes, of course – I mean, I don't mind at all," Feliciano stammered. He pushed himself up, his chair screeching on the floor. With a wince at the sound, he gathered as many empty plates as he could hold and carried them through the dining room door into the kitchen.

Erzsé already had the sink filled with warm, soapy water. The running tap was dissonant over the sound of muffled conversation through the wall. Feliciano set the dirty plates down and picked up a towel, set to dry everything that Erzsé handed to him.

"Thank you for the help. I've been telling Roderich to get a damn dishwasher for years, but he's either too stubborn or too lazy," Erzsé shook her head as she rolled up the sleeves of her sweater. "At this point, I'm going to stop visiting."

"It's no problem," Feliciano replied quietly, smiling out of habit.

The two of them fell into a silent routine, with the splash of water and the muted conversation from the dining room filling the space between them. It was comfortable, in a way – or familiar at least. In the past, they'd always complete the chores together. It was the 21 st Century now, of course, and Erzsé had no obligations as a woman to do the housework, and Feliciano was an independent, grown man – but this had always been *their* time. Erzsé

washed the dishware, and passed it to Feliciano, who dried it all off and set each piece aside to be put in its proper place when they were finished.

“So,” Erzsé spoke after several minutes of working in silence. “You and Ludwig seem to be… getting along quite well.”

Feliciano dropped the plate he’d been drying. He tried to catch it, but his hand was damp and the ceramic slipped from his fingers and crashed onto the floor. Jumping back from the shatter, Feliciano barely had the time to register what had happened before the door to the dining room was swinging open. His gaze snapped up to find Ludwig standing in the doorway, eyes locked on him.

“Is everything alright?” Ludwig asked in a rush.

Feliciano could feel the German’s gaze raking over him, and he felt a painful fire race over his skin. He plastered on a smile. “Yep! I was just being clumsy. Tell Roderich I’ll pay him back for the plate!” he chirped.

Ludwig lingered in the doorway. “Of course. Did you need any help finishing up? I could get the broom and dustpan.”

Erzsé laughed and rolled her eyes. “Oh, sit down, Ludwig. Try relaxing for once. We’ve got it under control in here. You’ll get your turn to do the washing up another night,” she said as she dipped her hand into the water and flicked the suds at him.

Looking for a moment like he wanted to insist on helping anyway, Ludwig inevitably gave in. With a nod to the both of them, he turned back to the dining room and closed the door behind himself.

Feliciano couldn’t help the full bodied sigh that rushed out of him once Ludwig was gone. He set his towel down, turning away from the door as he willed himself to stop shaking. Behind him, he could hear Erzsé taking the towel and drying off her hands. She seemed to hesitate a moment before reaching out to lay her hand on his shoulder.

“Feli…”

“I know,” Feliciano cut her off. “I know, Erzsé. Going to Munich was a mistake.”

When Erzsé gave his shoulder a gentle tug, Feliciano finally turned around to face her. He would have preferred it if she were angry. That look of pity was too much for him to bear. There was too much kindness in her eyes. Finally, Erzsé sighed, moving her hand up to cup his cheek. “Just… be careful, okay?”

Feliciano couldn’t find his voice. He managed to nod, hanging his head like a scolded child as she leaned in to kiss his cheek.

“Now come on. Help me finish up,” Erzsé said as she turned back to the sink. “I’ve got a couple pieces of chocolate in it for you.”

Feliciano laughed, finding it came genuine as crossed the room to grab the broom and dust pan. “You know you don’t have to bribe me with treats anymore.”

Erzsé only shrugged. “I know, but it still makes the work a little sweeter.”

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Austria, 1640’s

“Feliciano? Feliciano!”

Despite the fact that he could very well hear his name being called, Feliciano had no intention of answering to it just yet. He knew who was looking for him, and he knew what that meant, and he knew that the moment he complied he would miss what he’d been waiting so anxiously for. Wrapping his cloak tighter around his shivering body, he rocked on the balls of his feet and continued to stare down the lane. Any minute now, the messenger would ride up the slope and around the bend toward the estate. If he looked away for even a moment, he felt like he might miss it. Of course, he was *very* well aware of how ridiculous that was, but his nerves just wouldn’t let him tear his eyes away.

The door swung open behind him. Feliciano flinched, slowly turning to find Erzsébet looming over him in her working dress, hands perched on her hips. She sighed, already reaching out to take his elbow. “Feliciano, for heaven’s sake, come inside before you catch ill.”

“I won’t catch ill,” Feliciano replied with all the tone of a petulant child.

Erzsébet remained unmoved by his pouting. “Inside.”

Feliciano leaned out the doorway one last time, silently praying for a cloaked rider to appear down the lane before he was inevitably dragged back inside. No such luck. Dropping his head in disappointment, he allowed Erzsébet to guide him into the house. The door shut behind them with a light gust of snow slipping through the threshold and onto the floor.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” Erzsébet said as she took the heavy cloak off his shoulders, “standing out there all day. It won’t make the messenger arrive any faster, you know.”

Feliciano shrugged, reaching up to shake the snow from his hair. “I just didn’t want to miss it,” he said. “I have a letter to send to Ludwig, and it always takes so long for them to get to him. It could be spring by the time he gets it, and I wanted to tell him about how pretty this winter’s been, but it won’t be the same if it’s not still winter when he reads it, so I want to get it out as soon as possible.”

Erzsé paused as she hung up the cloak, glancing down at the boy in clear amusement. “I’ll have someone hold the messenger and let us know as soon as he comes,” she conceded. “But *only* if you come warm up.”

Though part of him would still rather wait for the post himself, just to be sure, it was an offer he couldn’t refuse – even if he did have a choice, which the tone in Erzsébet’s voice strongly suggested otherwise. So, he gave in, allowing her to lead him toward the kitchen, where the hearth was already blazing with heat. Erzsébet nudged him into a chair by the fire. She hadn’t turned her back on him for more than a second before he was sneezing into his sleeve.

Erzsébet looked over at him again. “What was that about not catching ill?”

Slumping down into his chair, Feliciano wrapped his arms around himself. The chill really was starting to catch up with him. “I’m not ill,” he insisted nonetheless. Erzsébet didn’t seem to believe a word he was saying, and he really shouldn’t have been lying at all – maybe it was his own little white sin coming back to punish him when he dissolved into a fit of sneezes again. Erzsébet knelt down next to his chair, taking a handkerchief out of her apron pocket and using it to wipe his face. Feliciano sputtered, and leaned away, but didn’t fight back. He’d learned well over the years that Erzsébet always won him over.

With his sneezing stopped for now, and Erzsébet relenting in her assault on his nose, Feliciano sighed and sank even lower into his chair. The heat from the fire was starting to seep into the frozen tips of his toes and fingers. Erzsé returned after a moment with a hot cup of mulled wine. Feliciano held the cup close, letting the steam rise up a warm his face.

“When you’re finished warming up, you can come help me finish the dishes,” Erzsébet said as she returned to the wash basin. It was always a little odd, seeing a woman of her status rolling up her sleeves and doing the chores, but Feliciano knew well that the servants in the house were limited – having too many humans around Immortals such as themselves always caused trouble. Unfortunately, that meant that the chores often fell to him and Erzsé. As if sensing the return of his pout, Erzsébet turned over her shoulder to smile at him. “I have some dried figs set aside if you should be so inclined to lend me a hand.”

Feliciano’s sour mood dissipated in an instant, grinning brightly back at his caretaker before turning back to the fire. Intent on getting warm as soon as possible, he sipped at his cup and closed his eyes as the warmth trickled down through his chest. To pass the time, he reached into the satchel hanging on his side and pulled out the letter he’d written for Ludwig. He smoothed it out on his lap, and decided to read it over to make sure it was perfect. There were about five pieces of parchment in total, all bound neatly and covered in Feliciano’s delicate script.

“That’s quite a long letter,” Erzsé commented as she glanced over at him.

Feliciano shrugged. “I had a lot to say. We don’t get to exchange letters that often, so I write everything down and send it all at once. I haven’t heard from him since the summer.”

“You seem to miss him quite a lot,” Erzsé chuckled.

“Of course I do,” he replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “I love him.”

Erzsé stopped. The light slosh of the dirty dishwater in the basin went still and quite. Feliciano found it quite odd that she paused for so long before speaking. “Yes, of course you love him. He is your best friend.”

Feliciano laughed, turning his attention back to his letter. “No, I mean I love him. I’ll marry him some day, I’m sure. He’s very busy with the war right now, but it’ll happen some day in the next century, I hope.”

Again, Erzsébet didn’t respond right away. Feliciano finally took notice, looking back at her with the slightest frown. Erzsébet seemed – upset wasn’t the right word. Angry wasn’t quite right either, but she looked troubled. Not at all as Feliciano had expected – a smile, maybe a laugh, encouragement of some kind. Just troubled, as she stared down at her reflection in the cold, muddy water.

Finally Erzsé continued with her chore, shoving each plate and glass into the water with snapped movements. “You mustn’t say things like that, Feliciano,” she said.

Feliciano only tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“You cannot marry Ludwig,” Erzsé refused to tear her focus away from the dishwater.

The flames of the hearth were too hot on the side of his face. Feliciano felt the burn like he’d been slapped, his cheek stinging with heat at the stern certainty in Erzsébet’s tone. He stood, setting his drink down on a table as he passed. “Why not?” he demanded to know. Erzsébet either deemed his question unworthy of an answer, or pretended to ignore him all together. He wouldn’t have it. “Why not?” he repeated. “Why can’t I marry him?”

“Because,” Erzsébet hissed, working her frustration out on scrubbing the plate in her hand, “you are Nations.”

Feliciano stopped beside her, steadfast in his position even despite the trembling in his hands as he clenched his fists at his sides. “You and Roderich are married.”

Erzsé shook her head. “That isn’t the same.”

“Why?” Feliciano pushed on.

“It’s complicated.”

“What’s so complicated about it?! I love him, what else matters?”

Erzsébet slammed the plate onto the floor. It shattered with a loud crash, and Feliciano didn’t have the time to jump back before Erzsé was grabbing him by the shoulders. “Who you love doesn’t *matter* !” she shouted with a rough shake on every syllable.

The silence in the aftermath left Feliciano’s ears ringing. He stood frozen, with Erzsébet’s fingers digging painfully into his shoulders, but too shocked to move out of her grasp. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t look anywhere but her desperate and heartbroken gaze. Before he could help himself, his eyes began to sting, and a tear slipped quietly down

his cheek. The crackle of the fire in the hearth, and the howling of wind outside continued on unaware.

All at once, Erzsébet let out a shuddering breath and let go, retracting her hands from Feliciano as if she'd been burned. She staggered back a step, turning her back to him – but Feliciano could still see the way her shoulders were shaking. Feliciano stepped forward to speak, to apologise for whatever he'd done wrong, but stopped with a flinch as he stepped on a piece of broken porcelain.

Erzsébet, with her back still turned to him, took the corner of her apron and used it to wipe her face. "The Messenger should be arriving soon," she said. "Go wait for him if you wish, Feliciano."

"I can still help –"

"Go, Feliciano," Erzsé snapped, her instant regret audible in her following sigh. "Please."

Something in her voice told Feliciano that this wasn't the time to push anymore. Dejected and confused, he turned with the intention to leave the kitchen. It was only then that he realized his grave mistake. His letter had fallen from his lap when he stood to argue with Erzsébet, and was now sitting at the edge of the hearth, slowly being eaten away by flames.

"No!" he cried, racing to the hearth and sliding down to his knees. Desperate to save what was left, he tried to reach out and grab it, only to yelp and retract his hand when the flames licked over his skin. Before he could do anything else, Erzsébet was at his side, using the sole of her shoe to stamp out the flames. However, there just wasn't enough left to save. When the flames were extinguished, all that remained was a few scraps of burnt parchment. Feliciano took one look at what was left of his letter and finally broke down.

Erzsébet pulled him into her arms, and in spite of their argument, Feliciano found himself clinging to her. "Feli- shhh, darling it's okay," she hushed him as she pet his hair. "It's alright, we can write Ludwig a new letter."

Feliciano shook his head, absolutely inconsolable. "I've been writing that for ages, I can't remember it all!" he sobbed. "Besides that, the Messenger will be here shortly, I'll never finish it in time!"

Erzsébet held Feliciano by the shoulders, the tenderness of her touch a stark contrast from moments before. "We will invite the Messenger inside when he arrives. It's so cold outside, I'm certain he won't refuse. That will give us more time to write a new letter. I'll even help you, alright?" she forced a smile as she cupped his face and swiped her thumbs over both his cheeks to wipe the tears away.

Feliciano cast one last glance down at the burnt parchment that he'd poured his heart out onto. Though he doubted it would be nearly the same, he saw this for what it was – an apology. He took in a deep breath, willing the trembling in his lungs to calm. "Alright."

Chapter 3

When Feliciano woke up that morning, he was warm. That was the first thing he noticed. He was warm, and comfortable, and the blankets were blissfully heavy over his body. He huddled down with a content sigh, feeling his entire chest expand and contract with a gentle stretch. In all the years he'd spent in this house, especially in the winter, it was a rare day that he woke up so warm and content. In all honesty, he couldn't even say what had woken him up in the first place.

That is, until he heard the light vibration of his phone buzzing on the nightstand. Feliciano opened his eyes slowly, blinking sleep away to find himself staring out the window as steadily falling snow blurred the mountain peaks into a soft distance. He rolled over onto his side, facing the nightstand where his phone was rattling against the aged wood. With a groan, Feliciano reached out and batted around for the phone, still blinking his vision clear. Once he had it in his palm, he rolled onto his back again and answered the call with a long yawn.

"Call back later," he mumbled. He had the phone pulled halfway from his ear by the time he heard the voice respond on the other end.

"You're talking now or not at all, shithead. I'm not calling back."

Hearing that gruff voice was enough to force Feliciano completely awake. "Lovino?" he yawned again, pushing himself upright. He rubbed at his eyes, before feeling around himself for a spare pillow. Tossing it against the headboard behind him, he leaned back comfortably and pulled the blankets up around himself again – now that he was actually awake, he'd of course realised that the old house was as cold as ever – Roderich just had *very* good taste in warm bedding. Feliciano shivered before huddling down with the blanket pulled up to his chin.

"Yeah," his elder brother replied. "Good morning."

"It *was* until you woke me up."

"Tough shit."

Feliciano, despite being hopeless when first waking up, still found himself laughing. "Good morning," he finally echoed his brother's greeting. "Not that I'm unhappy to hear from you, but why are you calling?"

"What, do I need an excuse to speak to my brother?" Lovino scoffed

"Unless you're being held hostage, yes."

Lovino chuckled. Though some might call it rare, the older Italian did, in fact, laugh at times. Even had a sense of humour, too. "Fuck off," he replied. "Just wanted to make sure you got to Austria alright. You usually call first. I needed to make sure you didn't steer the car off a fucking mountain or something."

“Well, you’ll be pleased to know that I got here completely intact,” Feliciano smiled as he slumped down further into his little nest of pillows and blankets. “Sorry, I guess I’ve just been… distracted, I don’t know. But Ludwig and I left yesterday morning and got here by early afternoon before the snow really started-”

“Ludwig? What the hell do you mean?”

Feliciano flinched. As always, his mouth ran too fast for his mind to keep up with. “Well…” he fumbled for an explanation, but knowing his brother, Lovino would be able to sense his dishonesty in his voice alone. Excuses were useless. “I… actually went to Munich first, and then we left from there.”

“Right…” Lovino’s voice was skeptical as anything. “Why?”

“I just missed the city and wanted to visit?”

“Bullshit, you missed *him* .”

Feliciano pulled the blanket up over his head with a firm pout. “So what if I did? Is that a crime?”

“Feliciano…” There was a change in Lovino’s tone, a warning verging on suspicion.

Finally pushing the covers off, Feliciano sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He couldn’t hide from his problems underneath piles of blankets. The cool air of the room helped to clear his head, but it didn’t make the coming admission any easier. “I, um… well, I thought it would just be nice to visit and catch up, but things… might have gotten a little out of hand.”

Lovino caught on immediately. “You slept with him?!”

Feliciano groaned, yanking the phone away from his ear in a sorry attempt to save himself the headache of his brother’s shouting. “Lovino, it’s not that simple!” he whined in a hushed tone. Glancing toward the door to make sure no one was listening, he pushed his hand back through his hair and tried to defend himself. “We were in Munich, we got dinner, it was romantic, and he was being so sweet, and he let me sleep at his house rather than a hotel, and –”

“That doesn’t mean you had to suck his dick!”

God, he could already feel the scarlet blush crawling up his cheeks, and the cool air of the room wasn’t doing anything to lessen the heat under his skin. “Lovino, please,” he whined again. “I know I shouldn’t have but… you’re right, I missed him.”

“Feliciano, you know what happened last time,” Lovino continued in a softer tone – almost borderline sympathetic. “I just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

Feliciano exhaled slowly. “I know,” he murmured.

“Look, I’m not going to tell you what to do here. Just promise you’ll be careful, alright?”

He couldn't help but laugh a little at that, even if the sound was dry and bitter on his tongue. "That's what Erzsébet said."

"Yeah, well listen to her. She's the only one there with any sense." Feliciano could almost hear the smile in Lovino's voice.

"I promise."

The phone call didn't last much longer. They talked a bit about Lovino's past week in Barcelona, how he and Antonio were thinking about spending a few days in Brussels to visit Margot before heading back and just spending the holiday together. Feliciano listened enthusiastically, but he couldn't help the slight twinge of jealousy that lingered in his chest. Lovino got to spend time alone with Antonio. He got to be with him, and even though Lovino *never* admitted it, Feliciano knew how much he loved the Spaniard. Meanwhile, Feliciano was sitting there feeling sick with guilt over indulging in his feelings for Ludwig for one night. It wasn't Lovino's fault, it wasn't *anyone's* fault, but it wasn't fair either.

With the phone call over, there wasn't much keeping him in bed any longer. Feliciano would have loved to lounge under the warm duvet for a few more hours, but he knew that he should head downstairs sooner or later – that, and his stomach was giving a loud protest at the notion of staying in bed. So, bracing himself for the cold, he hopped off the edge of the bed and scurried across the chilled floorboards to his suitcase. He'd been so caught up in everything last night, too stuck inside his own head, that he hadn't bothered unpacking. He threw the lid of the case open, rooting around for a pair of trousers, a sweater, and warm wool socks.

It was as he was searching for an outfit, though, that Ludwig's rosary fell out and clattered onto the floor. Feliciano stopped, scrambling down to sweep it up with a paranoid glance at the door. God, he needed to do something with it. Bad enough that he'd taken it. He'd put it away with his own rosary, he decided – but later. For now, he was certain that the ancient walls of the house would turn to ice at any moment, and he'd been soon to follow. Hiding the rosary in the bottom of his suitcase again, Feliciano focused on getting dressed. Now, at least he wouldn't freeze to death on the way from his bedroom to the kitchen. He paused at the door only for a moment, looking back at his suitcase, where the pale blue cover of "Romeo and Juliet" was peeking out from under a cream scarf. Feliciano turned back, swept it up, and tucked the book under his arm before heading down stairs.

The others were all up by the time he got down there, gathered in the old kitchen around the hearth. The room already smelled of coffee and fresh bread, all laid out on the side table with jam, cheese, and carved ham. It appeared that most of them had already eaten at that point, but that was hardly surprising – Germans, or at least those with prolonged exposure, were unfailingly early risers. Even if only because those exposed had no choice but to rise early with them. Feliciano had been blessedly resilient in that factor.

"Good morning, Feliciano!" Lili chirped with a bright eyed smile when he entered the room.

Feliciano bound over to her seat at the table, giving her a kiss on the cheek in greeting. "Buongiorno!" he replied. Vash's glare at him for the innocent kiss didn't go unnoticed, but Feliciano responded only with a brighter smile. "What's wrong, Vash? Did you want a good morning kiss as well?"

Roderich, poised as ever, nearly choked on his coffee at the appalled look on Vash's face. In the end, try as he might, Vash couldn't help but laugh and brush Feliciano off, more than used to his unconventionally affectionate ways – though that didn't seem to mean he understood them. With a grin, Feliciano made his way over to the side table to set up his plate for breakfast.

"Did you sleep well?" Roderich asked, making a face when he noticed the coffee he'd spilled on his shirt.

Feliciano grabbed an extra napkin from the set-up on the table, passing it to the Austrian as he walked by. "I slept perfectly! I don't think I tossed once the entire night."

"I was half tempted to go in and make sure you were breathing this morning," Gilbert teased from the couch. "You sleep like a rock."

"I've always been a heavy sleeper," Feliciano shrugged as he took his first sip of coffee. It wasn't exactly to *his* taste, but it was drinkable at least. Everyone else seemed to enjoy it, anyway, and Feliciano had learned (the hard way) not to be so rude and vocal about his palate. He glanced around the room. Vash and Lili were seated at the table with Gilbert, Erzsé was leaning back against the counter as she sipped at her coffee, and Roderich had taken up a chair closer to the fireplace. However, one key person seemed to be missing. "Where's Ludwig?" he asked, straining his voice into nonchalance.

"I think he got up early this morning to go for a hike," Gilbert answered with a shrug.

Feliciano nodded, his gaze drifting out the window to the slope of the mountain. There were a few trails that lead from the estate, ending in the valley, or at picturesque ridges where he'd have picnics with Erzsébet as a child, or at the ruins of what had once been the local town. Feliciano felt his stomach tighten. Ludwig wasn't as familiar with these trails, but surely he wouldn't go too far if he was just out for some morning exercise.

It was a better comfort in his head. Breakfast came and went, and Gilbert (after minimal whining and a threat from Erzsé, brandishing her plush slipper as a weapon) took his turn to clean up. Vash and Lili headed out just before noon to catch the train back to Zurich. A few hours passed, and everyone went about their days. Feliciano found himself returning to the parlour and taking up a place on the chaise, spread out with a blanket over his lap and warm cider on the side table. The fire in there had been lit as well, and continued crackling on steadily in the background, throwing out flickering light into the room. The sky outside was overcast, with heavy grey clouds looming low overhead. It was probably a good thing that Vash and Lili left when they did. The snow was starting to fall heavier and heavier as the day went on, and what to him seemed like a peaceful covering would probably be detrimental to a train track. Feliciano caught himself staring out the window at the hiking paths, waiting for a figure to come walking up toward the house. He shook his head and focused his attention back on the book settled against his knees.

Romeo & Juliet, Act I Scene V. Feliciano smiled as he lost himself in the well memorised verses. It was like reading it for the first time all over again, on crisp, fresh sheets bound by an unblemished cover. All his other copies were practically falling apart at the seams, their bindings cracked and pages damaged with age. Feliciano still remembered the first time he

saw the play performed, back in the 18 th Century. He'd cried like nothing else, half tempted to jump up on the stage and change the ending.

He'd just turned the page between the next Act when he heard a door, deeper into the house, opening and closing with a soft creak. He smothered down hope as he heard footsteps approaching the parlour, refusing to anticipate who might be at the door – but sure enough, when he looked up, Ludwig was there, slipping a scarf off his neck and smoothing the snowflakes from his hair. Feliciano smiled. "Good morning," he breathed.

"It is almost noon," Ludwig corrected him with a raised brow as he stepped into the room.

Feliciano shrugged. "Almost, but not yet. It still counts as morning."

Ludwig chuckled as he took a seat opposite the chaise on one of the arm chairs, sitting a bit sideways to face the Italian. "And have you moved from that lounge yet this morning?" he questioned.

"Of course I have!" Feliciano feigned offense. "Why, just half an hour ago, I was laying on the sofa, and before that, I was eating breakfast at the table. And let's not forget that I had to drag myself all the way from my bedroom and down the stairs. I'm already exhausted."

Ludwig's amused chuckle dissolved into a genuine laugh that had gold pooling in Feliciano's stomach. "Well," the blond shook his head. "If you're inclined to get any fresh air at some point today…" he trailed off there, smoothing his hand back through is hair out of bashful habit, "maybe you'd like to come down into town with me? You did say you wanted to see the Christmas Markets, and they have a light show set up. I thought you might like that."

Feliciano closed the book in his lap and sat upright. "I would love that," he beamed.

Ludwig smiled back, that rare and subtle expression like sunlight on the mountain face. His gaze flickered down to the cover of the book, lips shifting into a curious pull. "You're reading it already?"

Feliciano nodded, passing his hand over the delicate embroidery on the cover. "I haven't read it in a while, and this copy is so gorgeous, I couldn't help myself."

"Well… I'm glad you like it so much. I have to admit, I've never really seen the allure of Romeo and Juliet. Not as a romance, anyway."

Feliciano looked down so that Ludwig wouldn't see the knowing sadness in his smile. "Oh, I don't know about that," he said. "I think you'd like it a lot." His hand brushed over the cover again, before he set it aside and hopped up to his feet. "In any case, I'll be more than happy to prove you wrong about Romeo & Juliet another day."

They took Ludwig's car down the mountain and into town. The city lights of Salzburg were a glow over the hills, close enough to drive in an afternoon, but far enough that they needn't bother. The small town of Sankt Sergius sat at the foothills below Roderich's estate, an ancient village protected by the valley. A river ran through the center, and the town seemed to follow its natural curves. The streets seeped away from the riverbank like aimless streams,

adapting to the little hills and rough terrain rather than trying to smooth it out. The more modern parts of town, of course, sat in concrete lots outside the historic center, or merged into disused old buildings, all without losing their charm. As soon as they'd found a place to park, Feliciano was jumping out of the car and running over to the frozen canal, where people were skating underneath a stone bridge covered in garland and speckled lights.

"Look at that!" Feliciano leaned over the rail and pointed down at the crowd, his breath already fogging from his lips. "We should go skating like that!"

"Feliciano, you can't skate," Ludwig pointed out, hands in his pockets as he walked over to join him at the rail. "Remember, when I tried to take you in Hanover? You clung to my arm the entire time."

Feliciano looked back at him with a pout. "Perhaps I was just trying to get close to you, have you thought about that?"

"Is that why you were shrieking every time we moved for the first twenty minutes?" Ludwig raised a brow.

Well. Feliciano turned his head away, deciding now that Ludwig was *very* rude and he didn't want to speak with him – even as he tried to stop himself from smiling. "Only for the first twenty minutes," he admitted, gaze gravitating back toward Ludwig with a glint of light in his eyes. "It wasn't so bad once I got the hang of it."

Ludwig returned the warm look, stepping up beside Feliciano and leaning against the rails. Their arms brushed, and Feliciano for a moment could feel the muscles, strong and warm and relaxed all at once, beneath Ludwig's coat. Ludwig gazed out over the frozen canal with a bare hint of a smile. "Feliciano… you never got the hang of it."

Feliciano sputtered, immediately shoving at Ludwig's arm. "Maybe I just had a bad teacher!" he argued as he smacked a playful fist against the German's shoulder. Ludwig barely even stumbled, laughing deep and resonant until Feliciano could feel the sound in the tips of his fingers – like a brass bell ringing through his whole body. As he finally gave up in his petty quest for vengeance, he resorted to pouting up at the German. The flush crawling over his cheeks and ears and even the tip of his nose wasn't exactly from the biting cold.

Ludwig only seemed more endeared by it. Though he wasn't exactly beaming with a smile when he looked down at Feliciano, there was something soft and adoring in his eyes. The ever present crease in his brow had smoothed out, and the tension had dropped from his shoulders, and Feliciano… well, he loved him so much he couldn't stand it. Love wasn't supposed to be this painful.

So, he did what he did best. He forced himself to smile even when he felt like running off and screaming about the unfairness of this all. He forced himself to smile, because he knew that with a little time and distraction, he wouldn't have to force himself at all. With Ludwig, it really wasn't that difficult. Taking the German by the hand, he tugged him down the street and toward the town centre.

Now, it wasn't exactly on the same level as the extravaganzas of light and festivities that larger cities like Salzburg or Vienna or Munich could put on. In the ways it was simpler, it was even more beautiful. The garland on the street lamps were hand bound with ribbon, and the lights stretching across the rooftops glowed an iridescent blue. As they turned down the old streets, where the sidewalks were narrow and the roads were still paved in uneven stone, the scent of firewood and mulled wine grew stronger. It was more – organic, maybe, was the right word.

Dozens of little wooden stalls lined the courtyard of the town, in the shadow of St. Sergius' church. Where a marble fountain stood year round in the centre, a tall pine had been erected and decorated with glass baubles, ribbon, and more lights. In fact there were so many delicately placed lights around the village that Feliciano got the impression of stars touched down to spend the holidays with them. Feliciano had lived through thousands of Christmases, had seen the best and the worst of it, and still, peaceful scenes like these never failed to take his breath away.

Before he could stop himself, he found that he was holding onto Ludwig's arm, leaning in as he took in the sights, sounds, and scents of the Market. In the end, he decided not to draw attention to it. It had happened naturally. Let it pass naturally too. God, he *really* was overthinking all of this.

"Oh, they have a band playing!" Feliciano practically squealed when he spotted the source of the melodic tunes drifting through the town. "We should go dance!"

"I'd prefer if we didn't," Ludwig cleared his throat. "Why don't we go look at the stalls?"

"We have all week. There'll be plenty of time for shopping later," Feliciano insisted. "Besides, it's not about the shopping, it's about the atmosphere! You ought to know this Ludwig, you're supposed to be famous for your Christmas Markets. Maybe Austria is starting to overtake you in charm."

Ludwig nudged him lightly, scoffing in offense. "Well, maybe I need a tutor."

"I will shoulder the responsibility with honour," Feliciano replied with a mock salute. "And I promise to be better than you were at teaching me to skate."

Before Ludwig could retaliate, Feliciano was tugging him by the hand once again and dragging him into the Market. Despite Ludwig's protest, the first place Feliciano dragged him to was the band, set up on a little wooden platform draped with red fabric. He did, however, decide to have mercy and not force Ludwig to dance with him. It was enough just to stand under the steady fall of snow and listen to the nostalgic melodies.

"They're very good," Feliciano commented as the grandeur of *Oh du fröhliche* faded into a softer *O Tannenbaum* .

Ludwig nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, but I think the Violinist is a little flat."

Feliciano paused, listening for a moment before conceding with a shrug. "He might need to replace his E string, but I think he's doing a fair job."

“I suppose I am just biased,” Ludwig added after a moment with a glance down at the Italian.

Feliciano felt his heart leap up into his throat, and though he tried to swallow it back down, it wouldn’t seem to budge. His heart was caught in a state of rapid stuttering, and soon enough he knew it was going to burn him up from the inside out. Feliciano wanted to kiss him. Before he could even think to stop, he found himself leaning up, and Ludwig was already dipping his head down toward his lips.

But it was as Ludwig’s shoulder shifted, hands coming up with their solid and gentle weight to rest on his upper arms, that Feliciano caught a chilling sight behind him. Roderich, Erzsé, and Gilbert were entering the town square from the other side, completely unaware of their presence. All at once, an icy panic shot through his chest, chasing away all that confusing and wonderful warmth. Feliciano moved out of Ludwig’s hold, reaching into his coat pocket for a few coins to toss into the band’s tip box. “Let’s go look at the light garden!” he rushed as he grabbed the hopelessly bewildered Ludwig’s hand and started dragging him down the street.

“O-Okay,” Ludwig stammered as he struggled to right himself and catch up.

Feliciano lead Ludwig away from the town square. The “Lichtgarten” was a few blocks away from the market, set up in a spacious park behind the church grounds. Strings of lights coated every tree like studded diamonds, and a sort of path had been marked out through the park with tunnels and sculptures all done up with thousands of glistening bulbs. Different colours flashed through the park in a brilliant show. It was an incredible sight to behold, all put together by the townspeople, but Feliciano still found himself distracted, glancing over his shoulder as they entered. Paranoia had sunken its teeth into his throat.

“It is very well put together,” Ludwig commented as they began their stroll through the path. They passed under an arch of frosted blue lights twisted to look like icicles hanging precariously over their heads. “Though I still don’t understand what that rush was for,” he added with a suspicious look down at the Italian.

Feliciano feigned innocence, eyes sweeping the park for the faces of their friends. “There was no rush,” he shoved his hands into his coat pockets, if only to keep them from reaching out to take Ludwig’s. “I was just excited, is all. The Lichtgarten is so charming, I didn’t want to waste a minute. Don’t you think it’s charming, Ludwig?”

Ludwig’s expression twisted. “I… well, yes, it is.”

“And I’m meant to be showing you about charm, so that Roderich doesn’t steal all your tourists over the holidays, aren’t I? So, I was just excited to experience all of this with you,” Feliciano insisted. It sounded terribly forced and fake even to his own ears. As they came to a diverging path, he looked to his right and spotted, to his horrible luck, Erzsé, Roderich, and Gilbert entering the park from another entrance. As subtle as possible, he diverted their path away from them.

Ludwig didn’t seem to buy his excuses entirely. Still, he walked alongside him under canopies and sculptures made to look like they were moving with the flashing lights. A set of wire angels played trumpets and flapped their wings in a slow, steady rhythm on either side

of the path. “Are you… are you alright Feliciano?” he asked after a few moments of contemplative silence.

Feliciano tensed instantly, his back going rigid. “Of course,” he rushed. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’ve been acting strange since we arrived,” Ludwig pushed on. “Last night, you hardly said a word to me, and by the end of the night it seemed like you were avoiding contact all together.” Ludwig paused there, straightening himself upright and staring forward. He cleared his throat. “Feliciano, if you have any regrets about what happened between us the other night… I will understand. We can pretend that it never happened. What we had in the past is passed, I can respect that. I just wish you’d *tell* me –”

Feliciano couldn’t take this anymore. The others were coming around the bend, and Ludwig’s nobility was breaking his heart. In a moment of blind panic and passion, Feliciano grabbed Ludwig by the front of his coat and pushed him backwards off the path. There was a large wooden board painted and cut to look like a castle, lined by thick pine trees along the path. Feliciano dragged Ludwig onto its shadow, pressing his back against the board before tugging him down by the collar and kissing the breath out of him. Ludwig was shocked still for a long moment, before at last easing into it. His arms circled Feliciano’s waist, pulling him in close. They were safe there, hidden away by this bit of darkness in the middle of a labyrinth of light. When Feliciano pulled away, he watched through the pine needles of a nearby tree as Gilbert, Erzsé, and Roderich passed them. He took a moment to catch his breath before looking up at Ludwig.

“Can we just… keep this between you and me for now? Just our secret. Please?” Feliciano pleaded, hands smoothing over the wide expanse of Ludwig’s chest. “I want this, I want to be with you, I *do* , I just… I can’t explain everything right now.”

Ludwig’s brows knotted at the center. “Feli…”

“Please, Ludwig.”

Though he seemed hesitant, Ludwig gave in with a slow exhale. He nodded, leaning down again to capture Feliciano’s lips. His hands moved up from around the Italian’s waist to gently cradle his face. Ludwig held him like something precious, even when Feliciano felt wretched. “Okay,” Ludwig whispered into his mouth. “Okay. Whatever you want.”

With last, lingering kisses, they finally walked back out onto the main path, fully basked in glowing lights. Ludwig’s suspicion clung stubbornly for only a while longer before finally fading, likely just chalked up to never fully understanding Feliciano. As they walked through the garden, the tension drained from his shoulders, and soon enough, he seemed to be enjoying himself. Every once in a while, Feli would catch him sending a fond, if not still curious, glanced down at him. Feliciano felt acidic guilt eating away at his gut for lying to him, but he forced it aside for now. Hoping to at least make up for his frantic behaviour, he slipped his hand into Ludwig’s with a gentle squeeze, caressing his gloved thumb over his knuckles. He knew this wasn’t much – and maybe he was just making things worse. After all, he knew that Ludwig was still confused about the state of their relationship, and all this push and pull wasn’t making things easy.

But – maybe they could have this. Was it really so selfish to want to be with the one you loved? Feliciano didn't want to feel like he was holding his breath around Ludwig anymore, like he was straining himself against a magnetic pull. Maybe he could allow himself this small indulgence. Erzsébet and Lovino's words came back to mind. He just had to be careful.

Feeling somewhat refreshed and at ease, the pair took their time walking through the remainder of the Lichtgarten, admiring the brilliant displays all tucked inside this quaint, enclosed park. Feliciano didn't see the others again, and so assumed that they must have just been passing through. So, with time, he allowed himself to relax, holding onto Ludwig's arm and losing himself in the splendor and spirit of the park. Eventually, they'd walked down every path and marveled at each piece, and made it to the exit of the garden. From there, they headed down one of the streets leading back to the town centre, bathed in gold from the streetlamps now that the black veil of night had fallen completely. With nowhere really in mind, they wandered down another narrow street that spilled down toward the markets. The tower of St. Sergius grew higher overhead as they approached. A few stray stalls had been set up along the sides of the ancient road.

They spoke idly and easily for the first time since Munich, that odd distance between them all but disappearing. Feliciano still had that voice lingering in the back of his head, telling him that this was wrong and that he needed to find a way out as painlessly as possible, but continued to convince himself that all was well. Lost in his thoughts, he caught Ludwig typing at his phone a few times, but didn't pay it much mind. It was as Ludwig was slipping his mobile back into his coat pocket, though, that one particular stall seemed to catch the blond's eye.

The stall wasn't really selling anything, per say. A few little figurines, and some pamphlets for curious passersby to take, but not much. The focus of the stall was more of an art piece than anything else. Underneath the wooden roof, a splendid scene of miniatures had been set up. The display was a magnificent rendering of the entire valley. Nestled in the basin was the village, recreated in its state from about four hundred years ago. Feliciano watched as Ludwig's fond gaze trailed from the village up the mountains. There, his eyes narrowed in slight curiosity. On one side of the mountain face was Roderich's estate, looking more like a small castle than it did today. It was a small detail though. Most people in the village didn't even know who, if anyone, lived there.

The central focus of the miniature seemed to be the second village, seated up on the mountain peak. Grey rooftops of stone buildings jutted out from the cotton snow. The village was enclosed by a rampart, painted delicately to look like brick. At the centre of it all rose the gothic spires of a cathedral. Feliciano froze.

Ludwig straightened up from where he'd been peering down at the display, turning to the stall owner. "What is that place, up there?"

The stall owner plucked one of the pamphlets from its case, handing it over to Ludwig. "That was the old village. It was destroyed centuries ago now, so all of the inhabitants moved down into the valley. Most of their descendants still live here. That there," she pointed to one of the cathedral, "is Sankt Bacchus. Its partner is Sankt Sergius, down here in the basin. The pamphlet talks a bit about the history, if you're interested."

Ludwig nodded in thanks. It was only when he took Feliciano's hand again and started walking away that Feliciano snapped out of his daze and stumbled to follow after him. Ludwig turned the pamphlet over in his hands, taking in the sketches of the ruins. "I didn't know there was a village on the mountain," he said.

Feliciano swallowed. "There used to be…"

Ludwig pocketed the pamphlet. "Maybe that's where the bakery I remembered was."

"That's not possible," Feliciano replied too quickly. He could feel his hands sweating, grateful beyond anything that he was wearing gloves. "It was destroyed not long after you… appeared. When you lived with Gilbert. You'd never have had a chance to see it."

Ludwig lifted a brow, but nonetheless seemed to believe him. After all, there was no arguing with the logic. Still, there was a thread of curiosity in the pull of his brows as he glanced back over his shoulder at the stall. Ludwig's focus rose up toward the mountain face just as they turned the corner and the tower of St. Sergius blocked it from view. The German shook his head and shifted his gaze forward again. "What was it like?"

"What was *what* like?" Feliciano faked ignorance in the hope that Ludwig would let it go. No such luck.

"The village on the mountain," Ludwig pressed on. "You spent a great deal of time here when you were younger, didn't you? Surely you'd have gone there often."

Feliciano faulted in his step, a half-second stumbled that he hurriedly tried to play off. "It was just like any other village in Austria at the time, I guess. Why are you suddenly so curious?"

"I'm not sure," Ludwig replied honestly. He looked down at Feliciano with a searching gaze one more time before moving on. There was a quiet sort of awe left lingering in his eyes. Ludwig had said once, years ago, that it was often so easy to forget exactly how old Feliciano was. Ludwig was born in the 19 th century, of course, but Feliciano was well over a thousand years old.

And every time Ludwig brought it up, Feliciano felt that pang of guilt in his chest – he was lying.

They headed back toward the market square along the narrow streets. "Why don't we stop in there to eat?" Ludwig suggested. He pointed to a traditional pub, a quaint place on the ground floor of one of the tall buildings lining the market.

"That sounds perfect!" Feliciano forced a grin. "I need to warm up. My fingers and toes feel like they're gonna fall off!" That much was the truth, at least.

The pub was busy, but not overcrowded, a warm atmosphere that welcomed them in the moment they stepped through the door. They were ushered over to a table in an empty corner, where they were able to shed their coats, scarves, and gloves to be hung on a silver hook on the wall. Feliciano rubbed his hands over his arms, still shivering from the brisk weather outside.

“It’s incredible how I didn’t even notice I was so cold until I was inside, isn’t it?” Feliciano said with clattering teeth. “I need something to warm me up. Ludwig, can you order for me?”

Ludwig, try as he might, couldn’t help but look at Feliciano as if he’d grown a second head. “That’s certainly a heavy responsibility,” he said, recovering from his shock with a light teasing as he took a seat.

Feliciano only smiled. His picky taste wasn’t something to be trifled with, they both knew that well. “I trust you… besides that, I just really have to use the washroom,” he said as he excused himself from the table. Leaving Ludwig without a chance of response, Feliciano weaving his way through the tables, nearly bumping into a waitress on his haste. He flashed a quick, dazzling smile for an apology, the expression vanishing the second she nodded and turned away. Not chancing a glance back at the table, Feliciano made a dash down the short hallway to the men’s room.

Feliciano locked the door and turned the faucet on. The sound of the rushing water cut out the din of the pub beyond the thin wall, drowning out the voices and distant music and clang of silverware. He splashed the water over his face, closing his eyes against the cold moisture evaporating on his cheeks. To be honest, he felt like he was being whipped back and forth between the literal cold and the emotional heat flushing through him every time he looked at Ludwig, or thought to himself how utterly wrong this was. At this rate, he felt like he was going to get sick with all this whiplash, even if it was mostly just in his head. Feliciano braced his hands on either side of the sink, just taking a moment to count his breaths and even out his heart beat. This was fine. He wasn’t hurting anyone. He was just in a pub, in rural Austria, with the man he loved. This wasn’t a *crime* . Taking a sheet of paper towel, he wiped it over his face, gave himself a once over in the mirror so he wouldn’t tip Ludwig off that something was wrong, and walked about out into the pub.

When he turned the corner from the bathroom to the back of the pub, he swore he could have fainted right then and there. Erzsé was sliding into a chair next to Ludwig, while Roderich stood next to the table shedding his coat. Gilbert had hung his coat up and was pulling out a chair, the four of them already in friendly conversation. Feliciano went back around the corner, pressing his back against the wall and looking up in silent wonder of when *God* suddenly became such a *comedian* . It was almost cruel enough to be amusing. After going through the entire process of breathing and calming down all over again, he put up a casual front and walked back out.

“Oh! What a surprise! How did you all know we were here?” Feliciano grinned as he took up his seat across from Ludwig again. Gilbert and Roderich were taking the empty table beside them and moving it over against their so they’d have more room.

“I texted Gilbert,” Ludwig replied. “He told me they were all in town already.”

Gilbert took his seat next to Feliciano, letting Roderich take the end of the table. “Yeah! Could have sworn I saw the two of you at the Lichtgarten, but it was too quick to see.”

Feliciano held onto his seat until his knuckles turned white, but above the table, nothing seemed out of place. That was his curse. He was a brilliant actor, and a horrible liar. “Ah, that was probably us! We went through there not long ago. You must have just missed us!”

“Funny how we didn’t seem to run into each other,” Erzsébet folded her arms on the table.

Never mind the fact that he’d spent half the time specifically trying to avoid them. From Erzsé’s cautious look, she clearly expected as much. “Yes,” Feliciano forced himself to laugh. “Funny…”

“I am not surprised,” Roderich said as he reclined back in his chair. “Sankt Sergius is much more crowded this year than it has been in the past.”

“You say that like it is a bad thing,” Ludwig pointed out.

Roderich waved the notion away. “Not at all,” he said. “I’ve always loved this town, I’m happy it’s getting the recognition it deserves. But as a smaller village, within driving distance of Salzburg, it’s become a popular destination around the holidays. Travellers are beginning to flock here for a more “authentic” experience.”

Erzsé smiled at him across the table. “Suppose they appreciate how romantic it is.”

“So what?” Gilbert snickered, throwing an arm around the back of his chair and Feliciano’s. “Are you afraid it’ll become another tourist trap?”

Roderich shook his head, but before he could answer, a waiter came by with the drinks Ludwig had ordered for himself and Feliciano. As the glass was placed in front of him, Feliciano was pleased to find a decanter of red wine. He was almost too quick to pour it into his glass and take a long sip, eager for the alcohol to settle his nerves. The other three ordered for themselves, and as soon as the waiter had gone, Roderich resumed. “No, I’m not afraid of that. Sankt Sergius will never become a tourist trap.”

“And why not?” Erzsé questioned.

Roderich merely shrugged. “No Ski Hills.”

And even in spite of his nerves, Feliciano couldn’t help but laugh at that. With all hope of an evening alone with Ludwig abandoned, Feliciano gave in. That tug and pull between the shameful heat and fearful cold gradually subsided and allowed Feliciano to enjoy the evening somewhat. There was still that tinge of loss, but he soon enough let it go. After all, Feliciano had never quite managed to hold a grudge yet in his life. Being angry or upset took up far too much energy.

Dinner didn’t last awfully long, but it was still lovely all together. Ludwig, Erzsé, and Gilbert shared a pitcher of Heffeweizen, while Roderich and Feliciano each had a glass of wine or two, and their meals came hot and hardy to contrast the winter chill outside. It was a somewhat rare occasion that so many Nations, even if there were only five of them, were gathered in one place in a public setting. There they were, ancient relics, sitting at a pub table while the other bar patrons went on without a second glance. It felt odd. It felt good.

Eventually they all piled back into their cars and began the trek back up the mountain. Feliciano slumped comfortably in his seat, his anxieties dulled a little with wine and good food. As the engine started up, and the car pulled out onto the road, Ludwig reached his hand

across the centre console and slipped it under Felicano's. The simple, affectionate touch was so warm Feliciano couldn't help but squeeze back. Ludwig only let go when the car rolled up toward the mountain, where the roads became narrow and precarious with ice. Feliciano nearly fell asleep on the journey, the soft red glow of Roderich's car's tail light ahead of them cast over his face as his eyes drooped closed.

"What…?"

Ludwig's murmur of confusion rattled Feliciano from his dozing. He frowned, reaching up to rub his palm over his face. He sat up straight in his seat, blinking the heaviness from his eyes to find that they had made it back to the estate – but they weren't parking in the old stable just yet. It took Feliciano a moment to realize that an unfamiliar car was parked just outside the main entrance, in the round-about at the end of the drive. Roderich had already parked his car where the circular path veered off toward the stable, steam still rising from the exhaust pipes as it sat idling. It was in the slight illumination of the car's headlights that Feliciano saw an elderly man standing alone beside the still, dark Volkswagen.

As Ludwig pulled into the round-about, the passing light for a moment beamed on the man's face enough for Feliciano to see him clearer. It was a face that took a moment to recognize for the changes he wasn't used to in his own acquaintances – aging. In his memory he still saw this person as a young man, with grey-green eyes and dark blonde hair, standing proud and strong in Royal Court. He'd been tall back then, taller than most, but now that height bent him over in a slouched back. His sharp face had weathered, and his hair had turned an ashy grey, thinning over the top of his head. Still, there was a proudness in the way that he carried himself that spoke of the once grand Kingdom he had been centuries ago – Württemberg.

Feliciano hadn't seen him in decades. After the German Unification, most other former Kingdoms had grown old and passed, or otherwise disappeared. Gilbert, of course, was an oddity in that respect, and it was a sore subject to bring up – he was a stubborn entity, seeming to defy fate out of sheer will and refusal to die.

The sight of the man, Konrad Braun, sent a volt of terror down his spine. Feliciano felt the fear as if Jupiter himself sent lightning down to smite him for his hubris. Konrad only looked in his 60's, pleasant enough by all means – and was, at the same time, the most terrifying thing Feliciano had ever seen in all his life.. He may as well have been the Angel of Death himself.

Ludwig parked the car. The pull in his brows suggested curiosity more than concern. He opened the door and slipped out, but Feliciano found himself lingering behind for a moment, struggling just to breathe evenly. His hands were shaking. It was only the sight of Ludwig approaching Konrad that pushed him to hurry out of the car and after him.

Gilbert and Erzsé already seemed to have said their hellos by the time they caught up. Roderich was shaking the man's hand with a warm smile, clapping him on the shoulder. Feliciano walked just slightly ahead of Ludwig, a side step in front of him with his hands in his pockets – it was stupid, of course, and as they got close Ludwig easily stepped around Feliciano to greet the old Kingdom as well, but he really couldn't help it. He felt his throat dry up the moment Ludwig shook the man's hand.

“Konrad, this is a surprise,” Ludwig greeted with the same warmth as the others. “We didn’t think we’d see you here this year.”

“Yes,” Konrad replied with a voice like smooth gravel. “Well, I don’t plan to stay long. Just passing through.” There was a subtle bite in his tone, a harshness that he just barely kept from seeping between his yellowing teeth.

“A short visit is better than no visit at all,” Erzsébet smiled. “Have you heard from Baden and Hesse? I’d have loved to see them this year.”

“Dead,” Konrad said flippantly. “Hesse about ten months ago, and Baden last year.”

The group went silent, the air heavy as the snow swirled in the headlights of the cars. Gilbert looked away, cursing quietly under his breath as he pushed a hand back through his hair. “I had no idea…” he said. “Why weren’t we told?”

“It’s not for me to say,” Konrad shrugged. “Maybe you didn’t listen.”

Those words left a sharp sting behind on everyone there. It may have been unwarranted, but it hurt because it was true. It was so easy for them to continue on with their immortal lives, after former Nations began to grow old and fade away – easy to lose track of them, until a decade had gone by and suddenly they were all gone. Württemberg was the last of the German Kingdoms left, now. They’d all disappeared in what felt like the blink of an eye.

“Well, why don’t we get inside?” Roderich finally broke the tense silence. “We’ll have a drink to them once we’ve all warmed up.”

It was a Band-Aid solution, but better than nothing, and the freezing air wasn’t doing anyone any favours with them just standing around like that. Inside, Gilbert stoked the fire in the parlour, while Erzsébet helped Konrad get settled in. Feliciano stuck close by Ludwig’s side the entire time, following him from the parlour to the cellar to get a few bottles of good wine and back again. When they sat together and talked through the evening, he put himself between Ludwig and the elderly man, sitting on the end of the sofa closest to Konrad’s chosen armchair. It was a subtle position – or at the very least he hoped it was. He couldn’t bring himself to meet anyone’s eyes.

“Did you see Frieda and Günter at all before they passed?” Ludwig asked when the conversation turned back toward their old friends.

“Not much, no one ever keeps much contact in the end,” Konrad replied tersely. “But I did see Frieda once at the beginning of the year, about a month before she died. She looked about 90 years old. Absolutely miserable, too. She never was the same after Ernst disappeared.”

Roderich spilled his wine. It was a subtle movement, a tremor in his wrist that had a bit of red wine sloshing over the rim of his glass and falling onto his shirt. It spread like a bloodstain on his stomach. Roderich coughed, setting down his wine glass and straightening up a bit. “My apologies,” he said with a slight crack in his voice. “That is too bad, though. It’s been years since he disappeared, but I suppose it’s understandable that she would still be upset. I am sorry to hear that her final days were so… troubled.”

Feliciano felt his gut twist at the mention of Saxony. He fought back a shiver and barely succeeded, lifting his gaze from his lap finally to catch Gilbert's from where he sat on the floor by the fireplace. There was a dark, knowing look in Gilbert's eyes. The twist in Feliciano's gut tightened.

They stayed up for another hour or so before Konrad abruptly excused himself to go to sleep. The remaining Nations only lingered behind in the parlour for a few minutes before trickling off to their respective rooms. It wasn't a lie to say that they were glad to see the man – after all, he had been one of them. An ally at times, an enemy others, but sum total in an odd way family, or at least something close. However, having him here was… well, without a better description, awkward. It wasn't said aloud, but there was an unspoken resentment they felt radiating off of him. They were young and eternal. He was growing old and watching eternity slip through his fingers.

With everyone turning in for the night, Feliciano followed Ludwig up the stairs to the guest wing. Konrad's door was already shut and the light turned off, with the muffled sound of snoring drifting through the wall. Erzsébet had been sleeping in her old bedroom during her stay (needless to say that during her "marriage" to Roderich, there had been separate sleeping arrangements for both their sanities), and Roderich was of course in the Master, but Gilbert was also staying in the guest wing. He hadn't come up yet, but Feliciano still glanced nervously over his shoulder down the hall when they stopped outside Ludwig's bedroom door.

But then he looked up at Ludwig and saw that subtle smile of his and everything else didn't matter. The little voice in the back of his head screaming "danger" finally went quiet.

"Well," Feliciano beamed up at him, "goodnight, Ludwig."

Ludwig's arms slipped around Feliciano's waist, pulling him in close. For a man who blushed to hold his hand in public, he was so darling and affectionate when it was just the two of them. "Goodnight, Feliciano," he replied.

Feliciano threaded his arms around the blond's neck, rising up on his toes to kiss him soundly. Ludwig returned it, stepping back a bit so they weren't so open in the hallway. In the shadow of the dark room, blocked out from the light of the hall, they kissed as easy as breathing. This was all Feliciano wanted. Ludwig was all-encompassing, he felt *safe* in his arms, like he could just shut out the light on the rest of the world and stay here.

In the end, Ludwig was the one with enough self-control to pull back. Feliciano couldn't help but whimper a bit, despite the fact that he was the one who asked to keep this a secret in the first place. In his defense, it was a lot easier said than done. Ludwig cupped his cheek, kissing him once more on the forehead, before the two said their last goodnights, and Feliciano headed back to his room. He padded quietly down the hall, the long, plush rug absorbing the sound of his footsteps. What he didn't take into account, however, was that it would muffle any other footfall as well.

"Feliciano."

The hand on his shoulder and the voice in his ear had Feliciano whipping around with a startled gasp dragging from his throat. He stumbled back, bumping into the door to his bedroom. It was one lucky millisecond before his fight or flight (read: flight) instincts kicked in that he saw who had accosted him. “Gilbert!” Feliciano whined, his hand flying up to his raising heart. “You scared the life out of me!”

“Sorry!” Gilbert half-whispered, having retracted his hands in a show of surrender. “Sorry! Didn’t mean to.” He was trying not to laugh at that point, and Feliciano very much did *not* appreciate the humour at his expense. “I’m sorry,” Gilbert repeated once he’d gotten over himself. “I just wanted to talk, and I haven’t really had the chance since you got here, y’know?”

A little more inclined to talk now that his heart rate had gone somewhat back to normal, Feliciano nodded. “Of course. Talk about what?”

Gilbert placed a hand on Feliciano’s shoulder. “I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate you being here,” he said earnestly. “Haven’t seen you around much lately. It’s nice to see you and Ludwig being friends again, but I know how hard it’s got to be for you.” His words were warm and friendly, and Feliciano understood that he was being genuine – but there was a tone of warning there, lingering underneath Gilbert’s tongue, and it was enough to send Feliciano’s heart racing all over again. Gilbert gave his shoulder a light squeeze. “Thank you for this.” With that, he let go and turned, walking straight to his room, and leaving Feliciano breathless and cold to the bones in the empty, moonlit hall.

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Dresden, 1990’s

When Roderich first pulled the dagger from Saxony’s chest, it wouldn’t give. The sound it made was revolting squelch of blood and muscle caught between bone and steel. Roderich planted his foot on Ernst’s torso, grabbed the hilt with both hands, and pulled again. As the blade finally gave away, Roderich was sent stumbling back with the force. That sickly sound amplified tenfold. The body instantly began to crumble away, falling apart in pieces until all that was left was a pile of dirt. A bare wind gusted through the narrow alley leading into the courtyard, and sent the dirt swirling over the stone ground.

Roderich turned away, dropping to his knees with one hand braced on a nearby pillar as he violently wretched. The dagger dropped from his hand, the clatter as it hit the ground echoing off the high walls of the small courtyard. Gilbert was the first to move in the aftermath. He braced his hand on Roderich’s shoulder, stooping down to pick up the knife – there was no blood left on it. Just a coating of grey dirt. He wiped his sleeve over the handle, staring down at his reflection on the blade. His nose still crusted with blood from the punch he’d taken not ten minutes ago.

Forcing herself from the shock of what she'd just witnessed, Erzsé hurried to the entrance of the courtyard, the clack of her heels too loud. She peered down the thin alleyway and out to the secluded path beyond. They were within the original walls of the Zwinger, an isolated square where the walls towered overhead and the sky seemed far out of reach. It was the old execution ground.

"We need to move," Erzsé was the first to break the suffocating silence. Her hair had fallen from its delicate placement on her head in messy strands. "Someone might have heard us, we need to go now."

Gilbert hurried over to the pile of dirt, pushing through the heap of clothes left behind until he found the dagger's sheath. "Where is Ludwig?" he asked, voice shaking as much as his hands as he slipped the blade into the sheath. When he received no answer, he shoved the dagger into the pocket of his blazer. "Feliciano," he snapped. " *Where* is Ludwig?"

Feliciano was still on the ground. He'd been knocked over in the fight, left to watch in horror as Saxony dissolved into enraged hysterics. His eyes didn't leave the pile of dust until he heard Gilbert say his name. "He – he's at the hotel," Feliciano stammered.

"Is he alone?" Erzsé pressed with a cautious glance at Gilbert. "If Ernst told any of the others, they might–"

"No," Feliciano cut her off. He finally picked himself up, standing only to sway on his legs. Erzsé stepped forward to steady him, but he righted himself before he could topple over. "I had Lovino stall him with Antonio, they're with him. But he still thinks he's supposed to meet Ernst here…"

The courtyard went silent again. Everyone turned to look down at the slowly dwindling pile of dirt, scattering over the cobblestone with every soft breeze. Erzsébet approached what was left of the former Kingdom, rooting around through the small handbag hanging off her shoulder. The strap of her dress was torn, hanging low down her bicep, but she paid it no mind. She took out a lighter and crouched own, holding the edge of Ernst's jacket to the small flame until it caught. As she stood up again, the flame began to eat away at the heap of clothing, casting a sinister red glow onto the walls of the courtyard. Erzsé then took a box of cigarettes out of her purse and popped one out, holding it between her teeth as she lit the end and took a drag. Gilbert held his trembling hand out silently, unable to tear his gaze away from the growing fire. She passed him the box and the lighter.

It had been a Gala in the Palace. Nothing horribly diplomatic, but with next millennium looming on the horizon, politics were still in play, as they always were. It was meant to be one last grand affair for Europe– bidding the 20 th Century good riddance for many Nations. As they'd found out over the course of the evening, Saxony had passed a note off to Ludwig during the cocktail hour. Feliciano had managed to slip it out of his pocket without him noticing.

'I have the answers you are looking for.' It had read, adding the location of this courtyard and a time to meet him – twenty minutes ago. So, Feliciano had told the others, and sent Ludwig off in the other direction, begging his brother to buy them time to figure out what was going on.

Ernst, still a veritably strong man appearing in his 40's, had flown into a rage when the four of them arrived instead of his intended guest. Ludwig had been coming to him with questions lately about the nature of Nations, a troubled curiosity about his own appearance as a young man in the 19 th century, rather than a child as most other Nations. Those questions had, evidently, lead Ernst to his own. How he'd found out the truth exactly, they didn't know. They hadn't had the chance to ask before Ernst revealed the blade he'd intended for Ludwig and attacked Gilbert. In all honesty, Feliciano couldn't recall much of the skirmish that had followed, so terrified and in shock with it all. All he remembered was Ernst dropping the blade, and Roderich sweeping it off the ground to put an end to it.

"Fuck," Roderich cursed once he'd finally pulled himself together. He braced himself on the pillar, slowly rising up and pressing his forehead against the cold stone. "How did this happen?" he hissed.

Feliciano flinched, crossing his arms over his chest as he pinned his gaze to the floor. "Ludwig… he told me he's been having dreams that… feel more like memories, from long before he came to be. I-I told him they were just dreams, and that they don't mean anything, I *tried* , but he must have mentioned them to Ernst, he must not have believed me, I –".

"When did these dreams start?" Erzsé interrupted.

Feliciano's shoulders slumped. "About 15 years ago…"

Roderich turned, leaning back against the pillar. He was still pale, but he fixed Feliciano with a pointed look from behind his glasses. "Ever since you two got together."

Feliciano swallowed hard, but nodded.

"Feliciano –"

"I know."

Pushing off the pillar, Roderich approached Feliciano. "The more time he spends with you, the closer he gets to remembering."

"But I'm not doing anything to remind him!" Feliciano argued, his voice cracking with emotion as he looked up at his old caretaker with a pleading gaze.

"That doesn't matter," Roderich said, almost apologetically. "You two were close when you were young, closer than anything." His voice was gentle and understanding as he spoke, but Feliciano still felt them like a slap to the face. "And that alone is enough."

Gilbert took a long drag of his cigarette before tossing the bud into the growing flames of Ernst's clothes. "You need to end it," he said.

Feliciano's head snapped up to stare wide eyed at Gilbert from over the glow of the fire. The light was projecting their silhouettes onto the walls of the courtyard, like dark angels looming overhead. Feliciano went numb. "What? No, I –"

“You need to end it, Feliciano,” Gilbert’s eyes met his, and in the light of the fire, their pale colour reflected the flames and seemed to glow red. “If being with you means that he starts to remember who he really is, it needs to end.”

Feliciano stepped back, but Roderich was still behind him. The Austrian’s hand rested lightly on his shoulder, and Felciano’s eyes darted between him, Gilbert, and Erzsé like he was searching for a way out. “I can’t break his heart,” he choked.

“Better broken hearted than dead,” Gilbert snapped. Feliciano flinched, tears already stinging at his eyes. Gilbert sighed roughly, scrubbing his hand over his face only to wince when he touched his nose. “Feliciano, if he remembers, the old Kingdoms will find out, they *will* go after him, and they *will* kill him. Not to mention how it could affect him if his memories return alone. We are *only* our memories, you know that.”

He did know that. Feliciano knew it perhaps better than anyone. That didn’t make it hurt any less as he held back a sob and nodded.

What was left of the clothing was burning up, and the flames were beginning to die down. Gilbert stepped on the embers. It was settled.

Chapter 4

Konrad's arrival at the house had an almost tangible effect on the atmosphere. Not that he was unwelcome, of course, but there was a heavy smog of unease in the air whenever he walked into the room. No one acknowledged it, but they all knew it was there. Out of guilt, no one said anything. Guilt for forgetting about him and the other kingdoms, guilt for letting them fade away quietly and without acknowledgement – and although Ludwig didn't share it, guilt for what they'd done in the past. It was the least they could do to share their holiday with him. After all, he had been one of them once.

Still, that didn't make Feliciano any less tense around him. There was an air of caution to the others as well, shared through quick eye contact and subtle movements. They were subtle, of course, in putting themselves between Konrad and Ludwig, like a few extra inches of distance were enough to avoid catastrophe. It was ridiculous. It was the only thing keeping Feliciano sane. How he'd managed to tangle himself up in his mess *again* was a feat in itself. It took some true skill to fuck up this badly.

Feliciano peered down through the narrow slit of window in the attic stairwell, at the snow covered estate below. It was a brutally cold morning, and Ludwig and Gilbert were out by the shed behind the stable cutting wood for the fireplaces (after a *very* long debate with Roderich over turning up the heater in the house which Gilbert, evidently, had lost). Feliciano lingered for a moment, watching the way Ludwig hefted the axe over his head with ease and let the weight of it guide the blade down to split the wood in half. He could barely bring himself to enjoy the sight. That persistent voice in the back of his head was just wondering where Konrad was inside the house.

He continued up the stairs. It was just past noon, and with lunch cleared and not much else to do, he'd decided to pick up rereading Romeo and Juliet. He'd gone up to his room to get the book, but after trying to lay in his bed for only half an hour, he became too restless. With a need to walk around and burn off nervous energy, he'd found himself gravitating back up to his childhood bedroom. The floorboards once again creaked underneath his feet, made louder by the silence of the upper floors. Feliciano opened the door to his room and was, again, reminded of just how much larger everything had seemed back then.

He sat down carefully on the bed, hearing it creak and moan under his weight. Otherwise, it was miraculously still sturdy enough to hold his weight. The mattress and blankets had either decayed or been stripped away probably a century ago, leaving behind only the wooden frame. Feliciano rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head, pushing both his hands back through his hair. He was anxious. He was scared. And more than that, he was trying so damn hard not to look at the window bench and what he knew was inside it.

There was a reason he'd left the Rosary behind. It was a piece of his past, an agonizing one at that, and it belonged in his past. Taking it forward with him seemed too much like separating it from what it meant to him. He hadn't wanted it to become something else.

But he still had to look. Feliciano sighed, pushed himself off the bed frame and knelt down next to the bench. It didn't take as much effort to lift the top of the bench this time, but it did stick for a moment before another push had it lifting away easily. And there, inside, was the box again. The scent of rose petals wafted up to him. Feliciano inhaled, and exhaled, and finally reached inside.

The wooden box still felt rough in his palm. Much the same as the last time, Feliciano held the box in his hand and slowly opened it to reveal the rosary. Its colour had faded slightly over the years, but the scent was as strong as they day he'd taken it from the cathedral. He thought it more than a little ironic that its counterpart was sitting in the armoire of his guest room downstairs. They were so close, closer than they'd been in nearly four hundred years, but still not together. Feliciano knew that he should just bring Ludwig's rosary up here, put them both away in the box, and be done with it – but reuniting them felt far too much like closing a chapter.

Feliciano took the rosary out. He held it delicately in the palm of his hand and set the box back inside the bench. Slowly rising up from his knees, he admired it in the soft white light of the window. Though the colour had faded and the rubies didn't sparkle as much as they once did, it had held up remarkably well over the years. Feliciano gently swiped his thumb over the crucifix, wiping away a layer of dust and grime. The gemstones came away just a bit brighter.

Looking out the window, Feliciano found Ludwig still hard at work cutting more firewood. Gilbert, however, had apparently gotten bored, and set his axe down in favour of gathering a snowball in his hands. He threw it at the back of Ludwig's head after his axe had come down, eliciting a flinch and an indignant shout from the blond. Ludwig let go of the axe, still sticking into the tree stump, in favour of giving what Feliciano assumed was a lecture on the dangers of disturbing someone with a dangerous tool. Gilbert just kept laughing until, in the middle of the scolding, he took out a second snowball from behind his back and hit Ludwig square in the forehead. Ludwig staggered back, shaking the snow from his face before reaching down to gather snow in retaliation – thus proving once and for all that he and Gilbert really *were* related.

Feliciano laughed quietly to himself as he watched the snowball fight break out below. Ludwig was smiling in that subtle way of his, tossing banter back and forth with his brother as they lobbed snowballs at each other. Feliciano almost felt guilty as he watched Gilbert quickly sneak around the back of the shed, unable to call out and warn Ludwig before the slighter man was jumping on his back and shoving snow right down the back of his coat. It was only seconds later that Erzsé came out with her hands on her hips, shouting something Feliciano couldn't hear – presumably telling them to knock it off. Gilbert climbed down and was quick to point a finger at Ludwig, who only rolled his eyes and stooped down to gather the wood he'd cut. He was not, however, above elbowing Gilbert as they carried the wood inside.

Heavy footsteps coming up the stairs resounded down the hall. In a moment of panic, Feliciano shoved the rosary in his pocket and replaced the top of the bench. He'd barely put it back in place before the door creaked open behind him. Feliciano spun around on his heel, heart in his throat as he faced the intruder.

Konrad stepped into the room, sparing no curiosity for what was inside or why Feliciano was up there. The man only stared blankly at Feliciano for a moment before nodding his head toward the hallway with a grunt. “I did not mean to disturb you.”

Feliciano forced himself to calm down, throwing on a quick smile. “Oh, you didn’t at all!” he said. “You just startled me a bit, I wasn’t expecting anyone else to be up here. I was just wandering around, and this was my bedroom when I was young, so I was just – looking around,” he stammered when he realized he’d been rambling. “Were you looking for something?”

Konrad raised a heavy, grey brow at Feliciano, like he was trying to keep up with the speed of his speech. “No,” he answered gruffly. “I admit I was just wandering around the house myself.”

“Sometimes it’s nice just to let yourself walk around without anything in mind, isn’t it?” Feliciano replied, smiling wider in an attempt to hide the nervous tremor in his voice. “I was just about to head back downstairs, though. Would you like to join me?”

Konrad, again, didn’t seem to have any interest to answer one way or the other. Finally, though, he nodded and Feliciano all too eagerly left the room with him. Shutting the door to the old bedroom behind him, he found that he could breathe a little easier – but then came the long trek downstairs. The two walked in step down the hall until the narrow flight of stairs, where Feliciano let Konrad walk ahead as there was only room for one person to pass at a time. The entire journey felt like it could have taken an hour. Not because the going was slow, Konrad wasn’t *that* old in human perception, but the heavy silence was too much to bear. By the time they reached the second floor, Feliciano felt like he was going to burst. Coming out of the stairwell after Konrad, he turned in the other direction, walking backwards a few steps as he spoke.

“I’m just going to grab my book!” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll see you downstairs!” Turning on his heel, he dashed down the hall. By the time he closed the door to his guest room, he felt like he’d been holding his breath since Konrad first walked in on him.

Feliciano lingered for a few minutes in his room, but he did eventually join the others downstairs. Surprisingly, they weren’t to be found in the parlour this time, but in the library in the other wing of the estate. Feliciano quite honestly just followed the sound of bickering until he peered into the library to find them all. Another fireplace had been started up with the wood Gilbert and Ludwig brought inside, in a corner alcove with a few comfortable armchairs. Roderich’s Library wasn’t overly large, but his collection was refined and well organized, apart from the pile of books and manuscripts scattered over the desk on the other end of the room. The decoration of the room was stately and grand without being too garish, with gold accents and a simple chandelier. Hung on the walls, between old paintings, were antique weapons, more for decoration than grandstanding.

A few of the spaces on the walls were empty, though. As Feliciano walked further into the room, he found that the antiques missing from the walls had been taken down for cleaning. Erzsé sat on the floor next to the fireplace diligently polishing a rusted broadsword, while Roderich sat on the edge of an armchair, leaning into the light of the lamp beside him so he could better see the groves of the flintlock he was cleaning. Gilbert, meanwhile, was

sprawled out on one of the armchairs (sideways because sitting in a chair normally was, apparently, boring). He was currently locked in a debate with Konrad over something or other – their German was too fast and their dialects too thick for even Feliciano to keep up with this early in the morning.

Luck would have it that Ludwig was sitting on a short sofa, and the only seat left was next to him. Feliciano gladly took it, entering the room with a chipper wave to everyone before sitting down.

Konrad held his hand up to Gilbert to stop their debate – a gesture that Gilbert did not appreciate if the indignant frown meant anything. “Where is your book?” he asked.

“Hm?”

Feliciano glanced over at him before realizing that, embarrassingly, he’d left it upstairs. “Oh! I forgot it in my room, I must have gotten distracted,” he laughed nervously.

“Your book,” Roderich chimed in. He looked up from the lock with an amused brow raise. “Are you still reading Romeo & Juliet? I would have thought you’d finished it by now.”

Feliciano ducked his head with a bashful smile. “I finished reading it yesterday, actually,” he admitted. “I started again last night.”

Roderich shook his head with a chuckle. “You know, you’re more than welcome to take any of the books in here if you’re looking for something to read,” he gestured to the floor to ceiling shelves.

“No, that’s alright,” Feliciano replied. “I wanted to read it again.”

From the corner of his eyes, he could just barely see Ludwig smile in the firelight. He sat bent over his lap, and it was only when Feliciano leaned in slightly that he saw the piece of wood Ludwig was carving with the tools he’d given to him in Munich. It was just a bare shape at the moment, an oblong block that Ludwig was smoothing out.

Feliciano beamed. Apparently he wasn’t the only one using his early Christmas gift. “You’re liking the tools?” he asked.

“They’re very good quality, yes,” Ludwig answered as he paused to look back at Feliciano.

It took everything he had in him to fight down the blush biting at the tips of his ears. “I’m glad. What is it going to be?”

Ludwig shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet, but you’ll be the first to know,” he said with that subtle smile of his. Feliciano’s efforts at not blushing didn’t stand a chance.

“You could probably carve a life-sized horse before Roderich finishes cleaning that musket,” Gilbert quipped. Raising his foot from where it dangled off the armrest of his chair, he used his big toe to poke to Austrian in the shoulder. “Seriously, any time this century would be nice. I’m getting uptight just watching you.”

Roderich was quick to shove Gilbert's leg away, throwing him so off balance he nearly toppled off the chair. "It's called being thorough," he clipped.

"It's called not knowing what you're doing," Gilbert grunted as he righted himself. "Bet you €40 I could clean and reassemble a flintlock in half the time it takes you."

Roderich only rolled his eyes. "Grow up, will you?"

Konrad spoke up, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. "I will gladly take you on that bet," he said. For a moment, no one spoke, shocked into silence until Gilbert looked over at the Kingdom with a grin.

"You think you can take me, old timer?"

Konrad rose to his feet, moving slowly until he was upright. "Don't forget," he said as he looked down at Gilbert. "I was the one who introduced you to firearms in the first place."

Feliciano perked up slightly in curiosity. "You did?" he asked.

"Back in the 14 th century, I believe. They had been growing in popularity for a few decades by that time," Konrad replied curtly. "He wouldn't have anything to do with them at first."

Gilbert only shrugged at Feliciano's questioning look. "I thought they were a fad," he said. Rolling up off the chair, he flashed Konrad a grin, and for the first time since his arrival, Konrad smiled back. Feliciano caught a glimpse of the eternally young man he'd once been, the man he remembered him as. The Germanic Kingdoms hadn't been awfully close in the past, and their relations were undefined and confusing at times, but they'd still had a sort of shared identity. Feliciano hadn't seen much of Württemberg in his prime, but he still remembered him as a strong, if not proud and haughty, man. Gilbert shook his hand, grin still wide and mischievous. "You're on."

Konrad returned the handshake, his grip still firm. "I am the last of the Old Kingdoms now," he said as he and Gilbert crossed the room to an identical set of pistols on the wall. "I cannot let you all go on and get too cocky. I have to put you in your place before my time is up."

Gilbert paused, hand outstretched and fingers grazing over the barrel of a pistol. Feliciano caught his quick glance at Ludwig before he continued on. "If you're looking for pity points, you're coming to the wrong person."

Konrad shook his head, though still lighter in spirit. "Nothing of the sort."

With the friendly competition underway, Ludwig set his wood block and tools down in his lap. He turned slightly toward Feliciano, placing his hand over top his for a moment. "Feliciano, would you like to take a hike with me this afternoon?" he asked. "There are a few spots on the mountain that I haven't seen yet."

Feliciano resisted the gut instinct to pull his hand away before someone saw. The idea of spending some time alone with Ludwig on the mountain was blissful, but he didn't want to

tip the others off by answering too quickly. “That sounds nice, I’d love to,” he replied, before raising a brow with a teasing look. “You’re not going to make me run laps, are you?”

Ludwig chuckled quietly. “Not today,” he replied. “Unless you want to get a work-out in.”

“I’ll pass. The hike sounds just fine.”

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They headed out within the next hour. The rooftop peaks of Roderich’s estate disappeared over the tops of the naked grey trees, and every time Feliciano caught himself looking back to see it further away, he found it a little easier to relax. The day was mild and pleasant, cold enough to turn his breath into fog, but warm enough that he didn’t fear freezing to death on the mountain trails. It was just an afternoon hike with Ludwig, some time alone together that he’d been desperately craving these past several days. Their time in town had been short lived, and paranoia’s grip around his throat had stopped him from really enjoying himself. He was just taking a hike with Ludwig. Entirely innocent and harmless.

“It’s beautiful out, don’t you think?” Feliciano asked as they walked side by side. The mountain trails were old footpaths and roads that used to lead down into the valley, to the town, and other secluded houses. They’d long since overgrown after new roads had been put in, but were still worn enough from foot traffic that they were traversable. Trees loomed high over every side of the path, bare branches topped with snow. Every once in a while, they parted just enough at the right angle to see down the side of the mountain, but for the most part, they were surrounded by forest and rugged terrain.

Ludwig, walking with his hands resting comfortably in his pockets, nodded. “Yes, I believe that was the idea,” he replied.

Feliciano caught that bit of sarcasm, turning to stick his tongue out at the German in retaliation. His childish pouting didn’t last long. The weather and scenery were too beautiful to hold a grudge, and Feliciano had never been very good at that in the first place. Unable to reign himself in, he ran ahead a bit on the path, marveling at the way tiny icicles dripped off the branches of a Fir tree. He brushed his hand along the underside of a branch, collecting dozens of little ice needles in the palm of his mittens.

“I used to love coming out here,” Feliciano said with a breathless smile. “Roderich rarely let me out on my own, so I’d often go out with him, or Erzsé, or – other people in the house. It was always fun to have company, but when I was allowed out on my own, I would explore the mountain for hours and hours. I never got tired of it.”

“You spent a lot of time here when you were young, didn’t you?” Ludwig asked, following behind at his own pace. “You probably know every inch of the mountain.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve visited here,” Feliciano admitted. “Usually when I visit Roderich, it’s in Salzburg, or Vienna.” There were too many memories here, but it wasn’t something he could tell Ludwig.

Ludwig nodded as he caught up to Feliciano, leaning over his shoulder slightly to look down at the ice still holding perfect shape in his hands. “I’ve only ever come here a few times over the years, usually just for Christmas, but I never really got the chance to come out onto the trails. I can see why Roderich has kept up this estate over the years. The view here really is spectacular.”

Feliciano’s throat tightened at those memories – years in the past when they’d come for Christmas. He’d never been one to subscribe to the idea that things were “simpler” in the past, not many Nations his age were, but… he couldn’t help looking back on those holidays with a sad longing. Back when he and Ludwig together, and it wasn’t kept to stolen kisses in the shadows, when they would all stay up into the late hours playing music or cards, and Ludwig would scold him for drinking too much wine, and the estate was filled with the old Kingdoms – it was a time Feliciano hadn’t fully appreciated. And when Ludwig would ask a prodding question, or start to remember some minor detail of his old life, he and Gilbert, and Erzsé, and Roderich would all brush it off and divert the conversation to something else like a well-rehearsed dance, and Feliciano didn’t bear the weight of this in secret. How could he not look back on that and think of it all as a simpler time?

Feliciano looked up at Ludwig. “It is,” he smiled. Looking back down at the ice in his palm, he watched as the heat of his hands slowly began to melt the shards, leaving dew drops on the wool fiber. He threw them up into the air, watching with glee as they came down. Ludwig reached up shook the ice from his hair with a mildly annoyed huff. Feliciano only laughed. “Come on,” he said, taking Ludwig’s hand as it cam down from his head, “you haven’t seen the best view, yet.”

Though they were in no rush, Feliciano pulled Ludwig along at an excited pace. He navigated the twists and turns of the trail, never hesitating at a split in the path to remember which way to go – he could walk this mountain in his sleep.

“I- Feli! Slow down,” Ludwig stammered as he was dragged along by the overeager Italian.

Feliciano obliged, if only because Ludwig was much larger than him and it was difficult to tug at him when he had no intention to keep up. “But we’re so close!” he whined.

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going,” Ludwig rolled his eyes.

Feliciano beamed at him from over his shoulder. “You’ll see when we get there!”

They rounded a bend in the path, a steep incline with flat stones laid into the frozen earth like uneven stairs. Feliciano climbed up first, before reaching down to take Ludwig’s hand and pull him up next to him – not that Feliciano was helping him much, or that Ludwig needed it, but his heart was rushing pleasantly in his chest and he could hardly contain his excitement. Ludwig grunted as he lumbered upright. Feliciano kept his eyes on him, watching his reaction rather than the view below.

And what a view it was. It was the clearest lookout on the mountain, a little plateau of barely 15 meters across with a low, crumbling stone wall bordering a 50 meter drop down the cliff side. Without any obstructions in the way, it was possible to see the expanse of the entire valley to the mountains on the other side. Every single tree and ridge of the mountain down to the rivers carving through the valley floor was in vivid and stunning detail. Ludwig looked down across it all with a silent awe, and Feliciano looked at him with the same expression.

"Oh…" Ludwig breathed.

Feliciano smiled, nudging Ludwig lightly in the side with his elbow before walking ahead. "And you dared to doubt me," he teased.

Shaking himself from his stupor, Ludwig raised a brow at the Italian. "I never said I doubted you," he corrected. "I just wanted to know where you were taking me."

"The surprise is half the fun," Feliciano shrugged. He dropped himself down on the low stone wall, swinging his legs over the side.

Ludwig rushed forward, arms already out to grab him should he slip. "Careful! The cliff is too high, don't –"

"Relax," Feliciano waved him off. "This wall has been here for over four centuries."

"That doesn't exactly help."

"I mean that it's sturdy," Feliciano shrugged.

Though Ludwig didn't exactly look convinced, he didn't argue either. Joining Feliciano, he sat with his legs planted (firmly) on the ground, sitting close enough to grab Feliciano if need be. It really was sweet – Ludwig had always been very anxious about Feliciano being clumsy or oblivious, even if he tried to hide it. Feliciano smiled as Ludwig turned enough that he could look out over the valley, and shifted so he could lay his head on the blond's shoulder. It was a bit of an awkward angle, but Feliciano couldn't really find it in himself to care. He was much too touch starved after trying (and failing) to keep his distance for the past few days.

"It really is beautiful," Ludwig said. "The view is so clear up here, it's like you could reach down and touch the village. It looks almost exactly like the model from the market."

Feliciano nodded, shamelessly nuzzling against Ludwig. "I used to come here in the summer for picnics with Roderich and Erzsé, and any of the other kingdoms, if they were visiting. We'd bring food, and a blanket, and spend the entire afternoon here. I'd bring my sketchbooks sometimes and draw the valley, or whatever came to mind. And Roderich would yell at me whenever I walked along the wall and pretended to slip off, but I'd always catch myself on the little ledge down there," he said as he pointed with the toe of his boot, down to an outcropping just a few feet below the wall.

Ludwig glanced down. "I should have known you wouldn't be reckless enough to sit on the edge of a cliff without something to catch you."

“Of course not!” Feliciano sat upright, bringing his hand to his chest in mock offense. “I could fall and break my neck and that would be an *awful* way to end a picnic.”

Ludwig burst into a deep laughter. Morbid humour always got him. The sound of his voice alone had his stomach doing barrel rolls in his gut. The sight of his smile was enough to turn his insides into knots. “I suppose you’re right,” Ludwig shook his head. “That would be terribly rude of you.” His laughter died down, and with a deep sigh to catch his breath, Ludwig returned to gazing out over the crystal clear valley. Between the adjacent mountains, heavy snow clouds seeped down toward the valley, obscuring the edges of the picturesque scene like a vignette. “You never tell me much about your past,” Ludwig commented. “About your childhood in Austria. I’ve always wanted to know more.”

Feliciano faced straight ahead as soon as he realized his mistake. There was an obvious reason that he never told Ludwig about his past – because he’d been there. When they used to come for picnics, Ludwig would steal the dried figs from Feliciano’s plate, and Feliciano would complain to Erzsébet, and Ludwig would call him a tattle tale. And when they were a little older and got along, they would chase each other around, or play games, or just sit and talk for hours on end. Feliciano would draw Ludwig, sitting underneath the shade of a tree, while Ludwig told him stories about his travels. Feliciano hadn’t said a word about any of that, but he’d already said too much.

“What is that?”

Ludwig’s sudden question tore Feliciano from his thoughts. He frowned, leaning back enough to look around Ludwig so he could see. Ludwig was pointing toward a break in the trees backing the ridge. It was wider than the trails they’d been walking on and through patches of snow that’d been swept off by the wind there was cobblestone laid into the ground. The old High Road. Feliciano felt the colour drain from his face. He swung his legs back over the wall, springing up to his feet.

“I’m not sure, I don’t remember,” he rushed. “Probably just a lane leading to some house that’s barely standing anymore, there are dozens of them on the mountain. Come on, let’s start heading back.” Feliciano moved to take Ludwig’s hand, but Ludwig wasn’t even looking at him. His eyes were focused up the mountain, where, looming above them with gothic spires and decaying walls, the cathedral of St. Bacchus could be seen above the treetops.

“It looks like it leads to the ruins of the old town,” Ludwig rose to his feet, gaze still pinned to the church as if in a trance.

Acidic panic rose up like bile in Feliciano’s throat. “We really should start walking back,” he insisted. “It’ll be dark soon, and –”

“I’m going up there,” Ludwig cut him off, already walking forward.

“What? Why?” Feliciano hurried after him, putting himself between Ludwig and the road. “There’s nothing up there, just a bunch of abandoned buildings, they’re all falling apart anyway.”

Ludwig stopped, frowning down at Feliciano. “I’ve been curious about it since I saw the model,” he shrugged. “I’d just like to take a look.”

“We should really get back to the house, though!” Feliciano argued, he searched desperately for any excuse, finally pointing down toward the valley. “Look! It’s going to start snowing soon, we don’t want to get stuck up there in a blizzard, do we?” The irony only hit him after the words had left his lips.

“We’ll get back long before the snow reaches us,” Ludwig’s patience was wearing thin. “Feliciano, if you’re too afraid to come, you don’t have to. Go back to Roderich’s. I’m just going to take a look around.” With that, he stepped around Feliciano and continued up toward the winding road.

Feliciano bit his lip, hard, glancing frantically between the snow dusted valley and the towering walls of the town above. If he couldn’t stop Ludwig from going, he’d have to go with him. Whether or not it was the right choice, it was the only one he could make at the moment. So, taking in a deep breath, he put up a false front, forced himself to calm down, and took off after Ludwig. He latched onto the blond’s arm with a smile. “I’m not afraid! I just didn’t want you to get bored up there, is all,” he said. “But if you’re going to go look at the old village, I’ll come too!” Even still, the words felt hollow in his throat.

The road up the mountain twisted along the plateaus and gentler inclines, rather than straight up the steep height of the peak. Though the path was wider, the forest was thicker the further they travelled up the mountain, the bare trees giving away to lush evergreens. The scent of pine and spruce was thick in the thinning air. Feliciano held onto Ludwig’s arm the entire journey. The further they travelled up the mountain, the less light seemed to reach them, as they walked through low hanging clouds. It began to snow, large flakes falling softly around them. It should have been beautiful – it was haunting.

As they got closer to the peak of the mountain, small structures began to pop up along diverting paths in the forest. Once sturdy homes, all that was left of them were piles of lumber and stone, overtaken by dead vines. Feliciano remembered these homes, remembered the families who’d lived in them. He’d walked this road a thousand times before. Ludwig, however, took in every detail with a studied wonder.

“It sounds odd,” he said, “but I feel like I’ve been here before.”

Feliciano shook his head. “You’ve probably just seen pictures.”

They came up a twisting incline, and just ahead of the bend appeared the fortified wall of the town. The top of the wall was blasted and weathered, but the entrance still stood like a gaping jaw, the wrought iron gate hanging from the top like jagged teeth. It was rusted into place, and the chains and gears that used to lower it down were either long gone or welded together, but Feliciano still felt like it could come down over his head at any second. They passed underneath it.

The medieval village was in ruins, yes, but with the lack of disturbance at this altitude it was remarkably well preserved. The foundations of each dwelling were still intact, and though most of the walls were falling down from decades of bombing and sieges, many were still

recognizable. The upper floors of some were still standing, their walls peeled away like dollhouses. Streets still carved through the village, leading down narrow alleys and into wide open squares where the decrepit remains of fountains and statues stood like decapitated guardians.

“Okay!” Feliciano chirped with a nervous tremor in his voice, “We’ve seen the village, let’s go back.”

“We came all this way,” Ludwig replied as he continued forward. “I’m not going to turn back immediately. As I said, you can go if you want. I want to look around.” Slipping his arm out of Feliciano’s death grip, he began to make his way through a narrow street. Feliciano hesitated only a moment before scurrying after him.

There was no use in deterring him, he realized. That was the terrifying part – Ludwig was entranced by this ghost town, he was being pulled toward the inevitable, and nothing Feliciano could do would steer him off course. Ludwig didn’t even know it, but he was navigating the streets like he knew them, taking the turns and roads that lead straight to the centre of the village.

“This used to be a bakery, didn’t it?” Ludwig asked as he pointed to a simple building.

Feliciano nearly choked. “No – I mean, I don’t know. I can’t remember, honestly.”

Ludwig walked over to the rubble pile where its northern wall had been, crouching down to wipe snow off of a brass plate. The details were barely there, but he could just barely make out the word “Hausbrot” engraved into it. Feliciano held back a sigh of relief – Ludwig had just seen the sign and made the connection, is all. Not a big deal, he thought, until he remembered the morning in Munich, and Ludwig’s insistence that there’d been a bakery up here.

A harsh wind ripped through the town. Feliciano ducked his head, wrapping his arms around himself and shivering as the cold seeped in through his coat. The snow was beginning to come down harder. Ruins just down the street were obscured through a filter of white. Ludwig cursed under his breath, standing up again to look up at the sky. The clouds overhead were getting darker and heavier. “We should find some shelter,” he said. “Try to wait this out.” He turned to look up the ridge at the edge of the village, and the cathedral looking down over the town from its height, and Feliciano felt like he might throw up. “Up there.”

Drawn to the inevitable.

Feliciano’s shoulders dropped. “The Cathedral? Why go all the way up there when we can find a place here?” he tried one last time to deter Ludwig, already resigned.

“It’s the only structure with both its roof and walls standing,” Ludwig replied, already wrapping an arm around Feliciano to guide him forward and keep him warm. “Come on, before the weather gets too bad.”

Feliciano stared up at the behemoth towers of the Cathedral as they approached its hillside throne, as if he were glaring up at God himself for this cruel joke.

They stumbled up the path from the town to the Cathedral, nearly slipping down the steep incline with the whipping wind and snow several times before they reached the top. The blizzard was coming on in full force, beating down on them in fury. By the time they reached the plateau, the Cathedral was barely visible in front of them, its spires obscured by blinding snow.

It took Ludwig a considerable amount of strength to push the robust oak door open. It took both Ludwig and Feliciano pushing their entire bodies against the door to close it again. The wind pushed back. Howling through the closing gap, pitching high up into the vaulted ceilings, snow whipped into their faces in icy shards until, finally, they managed to get the wooden beam down to lock it. Both men leaned back against the door, sliding down to the stone tiles to catch their breaths. The wind continued to whistle and whine outside, but within the cathedral walls, they were safe from the bitter Alpine winter.

Neither of them laughed. It was an odd thing to notice, the lack of mirth as they both sat catching their breaths from beating the storm, but Feliciano felt it almost out of place. He tilted his head back against the door, closing his eyes as he absorbed the sensation of snow melting from the top of his head and trickling down his neck.

“I am sorry,” Ludwig broke the silence. He slicked his hand back through his damp hair, exhaling roughly. “You were right about the blizzard. I should have listened.”

Feliciano kept his eyes shut, but could hear Ludwig’s movements with a startling clarity. The wind continued to howl outside, but the walls of the Cathedral dulled it down to a quiet hum. “It’s not your fault,” he replied. “Even I didn’t think the storm would catch up so quickly.”

“Well, we may be here for a while,” Ludwig grunted, bracing one hand on the door to rise to his feet. “We may as well get comfortable.”

Feliciano wasn’t sure he could do that. He wasn’t even sure he could open his eyes. With a steadying breath, he forced himself to look on the exhale, and – it wasn’t surprise he felt. It wasn’t fear, or anxiety, or sadness. Returning to this place for the first time in over a century, he thought he’d be struck with emotions strong enough to bring him to his knees. When Feliciano opened his eyes, all he felt was an eerie calm. For hundreds of years, he’d dreamed of that night he’d spent with Ludwig inside this Cathedral, enclosed inside by a roaring storm of snow and wind. He’d dreamed about stepping back into that memory, reliving it over and over until the details were worn like the spine of a well-read book. Now he was here.

The emptiness was overwhelming. Every breath felt like an intrusion. The Cathedral had been untouched for centuries now, and yet still the abandonment felt only like some witching hour between masses. The lack of laity and clergy was startling. After all this time, it was as if the villagers could start filing through the doors at any moment for their worship.

Sankt Bacchus had become more of a grave than a church. The cavernous space swallowed them whole. Down the nave of the church, the long aisle where the pews had once stretched up toward the chancel had been stripped clean. Only a spare few benches were left behind, broken and cracked and not worth being taken away for scrap lumber. The grand pillars seemed one touch away from disintegrating, and several had already toppled over. A crack in the apse over the sanctuary allowed a beam of muted daylight to shine inside, illuminating

the snowflakes slipping through the gap. The floor was dull and dirty, the baroque tiles barely holding any distinguishable colour. On either side of the cathedral, beneath the two tiers of collapsing balconies lining the nave, were empty spaces where statues of the saints had once watched over the offerings and kneeling pews. They'd long ago been stolen, broken, or scrapped. What few were left were barely recognizable, lining the way to empty side altars and confession booths.

Overhead, the weathered stone pillars just barely supported the vaulted arches of the ceiling. The azure dotted with gold stars were some of the only details that remained of the old Cathedrals original grandeur, and even they had faded over time. The domed apse that had once been vibrant with deep blues and accents of red, purple, silver, and gold was now dismal and gloomy. It had once been a scene of heaven, and like most else in the Cathedral, was now empty. The angels had fallen down over the sanctuary, and the golden façade of the castle behind the altar was tarnished. A discoloured mark had been left behind where the crucifix once hung.

"We shouldn't be here," Feliciano whispered.

Ludwig looked down at him. "What was that?"

Feliciano hesitated. That devastating calmness was overtaking him again. Ludwig was gazing down at him with gentle curiosity and concern, and for just a moment, Feliciano could pretend that the Cathedral behind him was intact and glistening like the day it was consecrated. "Nothing," he exhaled. Ludwig extended his hand, and Feliciano took it, rising to his feet slowly.

The ruins of the Cathedral were haunting and hollow and beautiful, and Feliciano should have felt guilty for how at peace he felt here. He couldn't bring himself to feel anything else.

Feliciano watched as Ludwig took in every detail of the Cathedral, or at the very least what was left of it. This was all a novelty to him, he had no memory to compare it to, had no idea what it had looked like in its prime. The Cathedrals in Germany were massive and elaborate, most of them older and larger than Sankt Bacchus. That, in itself, wasn't the spectacle. The gothic and the ancient were nothing new. It was the decay of this once holy place that seemed to entrance Ludwig.

"Incredible," Ludwig murmured. "There is so much detail left. You can still see the night sky painted on the ceiling."

An echo resounded in Feliciano's head. He smiled to himself, walking ahead of Ludwig. "Come, gentle night," he recited as he stepped over the toppled remains of the holy water basin. "Come, loving, black-brow'd night. Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars. And he will make the face of heaven so fine, that all the world will be in love with night." When he looked over his shoulder, Ludwig was staring back at him with a daunted wonder in his eyes. Feliciano couldn't help but laugh a bit.

Ludwig snapped out of his daze, shaking his head with a slightly embarrassed laugh. "I still don't quite understand your obsession with Romeo and Juliet."

“It’s not an *obsession* ,” Feliciano defended himself with a slight pout. “It’s an appreciation. And I appreciate it because… it means a lot to me. There are many parts of the story that I can relate to.” He brushed his hand over one of the few remaining pews, feeling the dust come off on the pads of his fingers. “Besides that, it’s beautiful and romantic and even though it ends terribly sad… I don’t know, I still love it.”

“The language is beautiful,” Ludwig agreed, though somewhat slowly. Feliciano looked back at him again, watching as he struggled to put his words in order. “However, I can’t agree that it’s any sort of romantic.”

“Of course it’s romantic!” Feliciano turned to him, hands perched on his hips as he leaned forward to mock glare at the German. Even as he argued back, his tone was light, and airy, and God, he was in trouble. “It’s the most romantic story in the world. That’s why it’s lasted for thousands of years.”

Ludwig couldn’t help but scoff a bit at that. “It was only written in the 1500’s, you know that.”

“I *do* know that,” Feliciano fired back. “I’m not talking about *just* Shakespeare’s play. He didn’t create the original story. He got it from a poem, and that poet got it from another story, and it goes back all the way to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* . The story… it inspires people for a reason.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s romantic,” Ludwig countered.

Feliciano’s glare narrowed. He turned on his heel, leaving Ludwig’s negativity toward his favourite story behind as he stalked up the nave. Behind him, he could hear Ludwig sputter, the step forward he took after him, and the following sigh that echoed up to the vaults. Feliciano, back still turned to the blond, smiled a bit to himself. He wasn’t truly mad, but he’d let Ludwig think that for a while. Call it revenge.

He allowed himself to wander, a natural curiosity to see how this place had changed taking over his hesitancy to be there in the first place. Most of the valuables had been stripped clean. The chalices, candelabras, the tabernacle, even the crucifix had all been taken over the years. Nearly all of the gold and gemstones had been looted. What was left had been left because it couldn’t be taken – decorations in gold leaf and gems laid into the pillars and the façade of the sanctuary. Feliciano removed his glove, and swiped the pad of his thumb over a dull ruby, embedded into a nearby pillar. He watched as it came away glistening clean, and smiled to himself.

“It’s not that I don’t enjoy the play,” Ludwig’s voice shattered the silence.

Feliciano’s heart jumped at the suddenness of his voice. He spun around, finding that Ludwig had wandered a little ways away, taking a fresco of one of the Stages of the Cross. He’s slipped his scarf off, and was bundling it in his hands as he spoke. Looking back at Feliciano, he shrugged and tucked the scarf under his arm so he could take off his gloves.

“Romeo and Juliet is a work of art, even I can appreciate that. The structure is sound, and the story itself is compelling. I’m not saying that it doesn’t have merit just because it isn’t a

romance, only that maybe romance shouldn't be the focus."

Feliciano tilted his head, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the pillar. "Well then, if you are the expert here, what *should* be the focus?"

"I've always understood it as a cautionary tale," Ludwig replied. Slowly, he made his way toward Feliciano. "The dangers of wanting something that you cannot have, simply because you cannot have it. Romeo and Juliet find a thrill in their attraction to one another because they are meant to be enemies. With their families' feud, they cannot possibly have any sort of relationship, and so that makes them want it more. So, in the end, they are punished by Shakespeare as a way for him to warn his audience."

Feliciano laughed. Ludwig clearly did not expect that reaction. He faltered in his step, frowning in genuine confusion as the Italian pushed off the pillar and began to walk away from him just as soon as Ludwig got close. Feliciano only found his confounded expression more endearing.

"You forget, Ludwig," Feliciano shook his head. "Rosaline was a Capulet."

"Rosaline…?"

"The first girl Romeo said he was in love with."

Forcing himself to recover, Ludwig walked after Feliciano, following him up toward the sanctuary. "She was?"

"Mhm," Feliciano nodded. He began to shed his coat, slipping it off and hanging it up over one of the remaining pews. "Juliet's cousin. Lord Capulet says so in his invitation list for his feast."

Ludwig clearly didn't follow, even as he trailed after Feliciano toward the pew. "Yes, well, that should prove it then, shouldn't it?" he asked. "Romeo claimed that he was madly in love with her until she broke his heart. Then, as soon as he met Juliet, none of that mattered. There was another Capulet girl to swoon over."

"But it *wasn't* Rosaline," Feliciano smoothed his coat out over the pew. There was still a chill permeating the ancient walls of the church, but he found that his sweater underneath the bulky coat was more than enough warmth. Much better than a damp linen shirt and trousers, he thought to himself. "If all Romeo cared about was the thrill and danger of something so forbidden, the entire story could have unfolded the same with Rosaline. Yes, he claimed to have loved her, and that he'd never love again if he couldn't have her, but that just makes my point. The tragedy doesn't come until he meets Juliet."

Ludwig, still, did not seem convinced. "I think maybe you are reading too much into it."

Feliciano picked up his scarf from where it hung over the pew and used it to swat at Ludwig. "I've had a few hundred years to think about it."

In spite of the cruel assault, Ludwig laughed, taking the scarf from Feliciano and laying his own coat, scarf, and gloves out alongside it. He took a moment to smooth it all out, frowning down at his hand in thought. “A cautionary tale is still more likely than a glorifying romance,” Ludwig pressed on. “If you are right, and it wasn’t meant to be about wanting what you can’t have, then everything else points to… ehm, to fornication.”

Feliciano smiled at that, leaning in a little too closer as he whispered in Ludwig’s ear. “Just because we’re in a church doesn’t mean you can’t say Sex, Ludwig.”

Ludwig’s ears had already been tinted pink, but at that remark, his entire face went red. Feliciano didn’t have much of a chance to tell him it was charming before Ludwig was shrugging him off and stuttering to explain himself. “Not just *sex* ,” he huffed. “Sex outside of marriage. They found each other physically attractive at their first meeting, but they couldn’t just have sex. The both of them would have been ostracized in that time. So, they called it love, and married in secret.”

Feliciano’s smile turned sultry. “That seems like an awful lot of work just to have sex,” he replied. Ludwig shot him a look. He relented. “Then what about Holy Palmer’s kiss?”

Now Ludwig tilted his head, his interest peaking. “What?”

Feliciano’s smile only brightened, brimming with light laughter as he took Ludwig’s hands in his. He turned his palms upwards, allowing Ludwig’s hands to fall lightly on top of his. The German hesitated a moment, his palms hovering just above Feliciano’s, until he relaxed enough for them to touch. Feliciano’s eyes, golden in the hazy glow of the grey light seeping in from the stained glass windows, caught Ludwig’s and held them in place. “Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,” he recited once again. “Which mannerly devotion shows in this; For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch, And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.”

Ludwig watched him, breath held high up in the cavern of his chest, entirely entranced. “I don’t understand…”

Feliciano laughed quietly under his breath. “Their first interaction is all about religion. Romeo approaches her with the same veneration as he would a ‘holy shrine’, and compares her to a Saint. Yes, they don’t really have the time to get to know one another, and fall in love like most people would, but… it’s as if they recognize each other, right from the start. As if they’ve been searching for each other, and just hadn’t known it until that moment. It isn’t about sex and physical attraction,” Feliciano turned his hands at the wrists, intertwining his fingers with Ludwig’s and holding them in between them. “Their love is a religious-like devotion,” he said as he looked up at Ludwig again. “Romeo calls Juliet an Angel. In those days… that wasn’t something you said lightly.”

Ludwig could only exhale. Staring down at their hands, he struggled to find a response, a rebuttal, anything – but all he could grasp at was a quiet admiration for Feliciano’s conviction. He tore his gaze away only to look up toward the barren altar. Many of the statues of Saints and Angels had been sacked or destroyed, but those left watched over them in spite of missing heads and limbs. Haunting. Feliciano followed Ludwig’s gaze, and found the all-knowing judgement of the figures too much. He let go of Ludwig’s hands.

Ludwig flexed his fingers as he let his hands fall back to his sides. “Then, if that’s the case…” he began, still trying to summon his voice. “How exactly *do* you read Romeo and Juliet’s romance?” His debating tone had melted into genuine curiosity.

Feliciano cast his gaze down, following the aged pattern of the tiles. He wandered off, toward the center of the sanctuary before the altar. Whether the movement was conscious or not, he put distance between himself and Ludwig as he mulled his thoughts over slowly. “Well… I’ve always seen them exactly as they’re said to be in the play…as star-crossed lovers. They are destined to meet, and to fall in love, and… to die,” he explained. The words came gradually, falling heavy from his tongue as if their weight was too painful to keep inside. “Maybe the whole point of them is to bring together two feuding families, or bring peace to the city, or whatever arcane reason people put on their suffering, but that they love each other is the one constant. It’s like… they just gravitate toward each other, and even if they try to stay apart, they always end up together. They are opposing and attracting forced at the same time. I mean… that’s the whole point of star-crossed lovers, isn’t it?” Feliciano asked as he turned his gaze upwards, toward the height of the sanctuary. “That they’re destined to fall in love just as soon as they’re ripped apart.”

Ludwig trailed after Feliciano’s wake, seeming to walk outside his own volition as he too stared up at the night sky painted over the altar. “I fear, too early: for my mind misgives,” Ludwig began hesitantly. Feliciano’s eyes snapped down to stare at him in shock and adoration all at once. “Some consequence yet hanging in the stars, Shall bitterly begin his fearful fate.”

It took Feliciano an eternity to even think properly again, his voice coming back to him hoarse and quiet. “Date…” he corrected. His chest flooded with searing warmth. Ludwig blinked, as if he hadn’t noticed his slip. A smile ghosted across Feliciano’s lips as he turned his body from the Sanctuary toward Ludwig. “You seem to know a lot about Romeo and Juliet for someone who doesn’t believe it’s romantic,” he teased.

Ludwig cleared his throat. “I… may have read that copy before I gave it to you. I bought it with you in mind, and… I supposed I couldn’t help but read it through,” he confessed, somewhat embarrassed. Ludwig carded his hand back through his hair. The snow had melted on his head, and the neatly combed hair now fell messy to the side. “I admit, there is something alluring about it, but I just couldn’t bring myself to believe something that ends in such tragedy was meant to be a romance.”

Feliciano held his breath. “You couldn’t allow yourself to…”

Ludwig shook his head. “No, I don’t think I could. But you…” Ludwig tucked a stray hair behind Feliciano’s ear, stepping in closer as he allowed his knuckle to graze down Feliciano’s cheek. “You can, despite the tragedy of the story. So… why exactly do you love it so much?”

Feliciano’s hands were shaking. He couldn’t look away from Ludwig; his kind eyes in the brilliant light shining in from the stain glass windows, his reverent hand on his cheek, his everything completely entrancing Feliciano without a hope of escape – even if he wanted to. The storm was raging on outside, and as the dusk sun blazed against the mountain, the vibrant light was caught in the haze of swirling snow. Suddenly, the Cathedral wasn’t decaying and forgotten. It was filled with life and gold and rich colour again. The shadows

were heavy and dark, and night was fast approaching, but for that moment, time was holding still. Feliciano exhaled, lungs trembling.

“It feels like these two lovers…” he began, “like they keep meeting in every life time. And they may try to stay apart, but they never can. They’re destined to be together. Like I said, that’s the point of star-crossed lovers. They’re written in the stars, and there’s nothing they can do about it. The story may change, but still they always meet, and they always fall in love, and… still, it always ends badly for them,” Feliciano reached up to wipe and his eyes with the edge of his sleeve, sniffling as he tried to hold himself together. It was ridiculous of himself to get so emotional, he knew that. It was just a story, a fictional tale. Still, taking about it with Ludwig, *here* of all places – it was divine cruelty. And Feliciano wanted it more than anything. “I just figure that… after so many life times of pain, there has to be a time that they can be together,” he ended in a whisper. “There must be a time for them someday, mustn’t there?”

It wasn’t a question, and Ludwig did not pretend he knew the answer. But for one moment, Feliciano could have sworn there was a light shining in Ludwig’s eyes, somewhere in the very back of his eyes where his soul looked out as if through a window. With his hand still tender on Feliciano’s cheek, Ludwig leaned down and kissed him. Feliciano wound his arms up around Ludwig’s shoulders and pulled him in close with a building desperation. The sun was slipping down into the valley, and the snow was still falling heavy. Darkness was coming, but Feliciano wanted just a moment to kiss Ludwig in the light. Ludwig wrapped his arm firmly around Feliciano’s waist, holding him in a stronger embrace.

But then, Ludwig pulled away. Feliciano whined at first, moving in to kiss him again before he noticed that Ludwig was pressing their foreheads together. Searching the German’s face, Feliciano tried to discern why he’d stopped. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Ludwig replied. He pulled his head back, looking toward the altar. It appeared as if he were staring straight through it, behind the sanctuary and down through the ancient floor - towards the crypts. “It’s just…” he trailed off. “I dreamed my lady came and found me dead…”

In that instant, Feliciano’s heart stopped cold. “Ludwig…”

A heaven shaking noise echoed from the front of the Cathedral. Feliciano cried out in fear, huddling closer against Ludwig as he felt the man’s hold on him tighten. The wide oak doors had been forced open, and on the other side, Erzsébet, Roderich and Gilbert stood watching them. Frozen in terror and shame, Feliciano met each of their eyes, stopping at Gilbert. He watched the emotions flit across his face – realization, shock, and fury all melding into one expression that would bring a Saint to their knees in fear. In the next moment, the expression had vanished, come and gone so quickly that Feliciano wasn’t even sure if it had truly been there.

Gilbert walked inside, ignoring the look Roderich and Erzsébet shared before following after him. “Fuck, we’ve been looking everywhere for you two!” Gilbert laughed. As he got closer, Feliciano finally had the good sense to step out of Ludwig’s hold, putting as much distance between them as possible. It was *far* too late. “We were worried you got caught in that blizzard, we’ve been searching up and down the entire damn mountain. Figures you’d be nice

and cozy up here," Gilbert clapped Ludwig on the back. "Come on, we've got a car down in the ruins. We'll have to take the long way back down, but it's sure as hell better than walking in this weather."

That was it. There was no time for an explanation, and no need for one. Gilbert ushered Ludwig out of the Cathedral as quickly as possible, and with Erzsé and Roderich watching him in barely restrained anger and disappointment, Feliciano followed after

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Initial hesitance forgotten, Ludwig rolled his eyes and followed Roderich inside. “And how old is it? You’re probably long overdue for a new one.”

“It works just fine.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

With the two of them bickering on their way into the house, Feliciano was left watching Ludwig’s retreating back, feeling the dread make its way from the top of his head and down his body, sapping any warmth left out of him. The moment the door had closed behind them, Gilbert dropped his hand off of Feliciano’s shoulder, jerking his head toward the shed behind the stable. Feeling more like he was walking to the gallows, Feliciano followed behind, already preparing himself for the inevitable reprimanding – it was enough. The moment Gilbert stopped and turned sharply toward him, he stumbled back.

“Are you out of your Goddamn mind, Feliciano?!” Gilbert roared. “The *Cathedral* ?!”

“I tried to keep him away, he wouldn’t listen to me!” Feliciano tried to defend himself, though even he knew that the argument was weak.

Gilbert shook his head. “Then you force him to listen! Pretend to pass out, fake an injury! You should have done *anything* to keep him from going, you don’t just *follow* him up there!”

Feeling the beginnings of tears sting at his eyes, Feliciano tried to plead with the man. “Gilbert, I’m *sorry* , I didn’t –”

“Yeah, you looked *truly* sorry, throwing yourself all over him!”

“ *Gilbert* !” Erzsébet’s sharp hiss resounded like a slap as she put herself between Feliciano and the Prussian, shoving Gilbert back by the shoulder. “That is *enough* , he gets it.”

Feliciano knew he shouldn’t have felt as relieved and safe as he did when Erzsé separated him from Gilbert, but he did. He stood there like a scolded child, eyes pinned to his boots in the snow, watching them blur as his vision filled with hot tears. He was frustrated with himself for crying, but that frustration pricked at his eyes like hot needles, and the tears just kept coming.

Gilbert however, stubborn as he was, didn’t seem ready to let this go just yet. “Erzsé, he brought Ludwig to his own fucking *grave* . He could have remembered, and with Konrad here –”

“He shouldn’t have let Ludwig go there,” Erzsé cut him off. “We all know that,” she said as she stepped away enough to look back at Feliciano. “It was a stupid thing to do, but it was a mistake. You didn’t do it to bring back Ludwig’s memories, did you, Feliciano.”

Though it wasn’t a question meant to be answered, Feliciano shook his head, unable to bring himself to speak quite yet.

Erzsé nodded, satisfied. “Ludwig didn’t remember. That’s the important part. We dodged a bullet there.”

Gilbert's narrow glare flitted between Erzsébet and Feliciano, until the Italian dared to lift his gaze to look at him. For a moment, the harsh lines of Gilbert's face softened, and his rage lifted to what truly lay beneath it – fear overtaking regret. He pressed his mouth into a thin line, huffing out his nose. Turning on his heel, he stalked back toward the house, disappearing around the corner of the stable, until all that was left was his long, stretching shadow cast from the light of the house. Feliciano and Erzsébet were left in the lane between the stable and the shed, the light of the moon barely glimmering through the veil of clouds overhead.

Feliciano released a trembling sigh, turning his head up toward the starless sky. "I need to go," he said.

Erzsébet tore her gaze away from Gilbert's retreating shadow, staring back at Feliciano with a mixture of confusion and pity that had Feliciano's stomach tightening. "Feliciano, you don't have to."

"No," Feliciano shook his head, shoulders dropping with a shuddering sigh as he gazed up at the veiled moon. "I shouldn't have come here in the first place, Erzsébet. I thought I could keep my distance, but… I just can't control myself around him," he choked, finally lowering his head to wipe at his eyes with his sleeve.

Erzsébet looked for a moment like an argument sat on the tip of her tongue, some gentle reassurance to lift this pain from him – but it fell silent from her mouth. She pulled him into her arms, kissing his forehead as she rubbed her hands up and down his back. Feliciano pressed his face into her shoulder as the tears slipped down and soaked into the wool of her coat.

He stayed behind when Erzsébet went back inside. Leaning back against the stable wall, he slid down until he was sitting with his knees drawn up into his chest. The moon was fading overhead, its silver glow hidden behind thick clouds. Only the dim amber glow from the windows of the house illuminated the barren estate. It was no wonder, then, that when he finally drew the courage to go inside, that he didn't notice the extra pair of footprints in the snow, leading from behind the shed to the back of the house.

Steeling himself for what he knew he had to do, Feliciano still couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was losing Ludwig all over again.

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Austria, 1640's

Feliciano was sitting at his writing desk when he looked out his window to see a lone rider coming up the lane. In the muddled light of the winter evening, a cloaked man came riding

up toward the estate from the mountain path. Overtaken by simple curiosity, Feliciano set his quill in the ink well and stood. He'd finished his chores for the day, and after his violin lessons with Roderich had concluded, he'd come up to his room with the intention to sit down for the evening and continue his letters to Ludwig. With his rosary tangled through the listless fingers of his left hand, he wrote about anything and everything that crossed his mind.

Three days ago, he'd gotten his first letter from Ludwig in months. As he'd sent out his own, the Messenger delivered a missile to Feliciano from Ludwig's camp on the Rhine. Feliciano had spent hours just reading and rereading each page, until Roderich had to scold him for wasting candlewax into the late hours of the night. Ludwig was always straightforward in his letters, documenting what daily life brought and what progress he and his allies had made. There were times, however, that he allowed himself to vent his frustrations. He spoke about how he was treated as a child, and even questioned the validity of the War itself – these were things he divulged only to Feliciano.

"Though at times it seems as if this war will rage on for an eternity, with either side refusing to compromise their religious doctrines or their own selfish objectives, I am praying that the end is near. We are closing in on France, and soon will have him cornered and overpowered. I intend to end this War by whatever means necessary. Only then can I keep my promise to return to you.

With my love,

Wilhelm Frederick Ludwig Braun. The Holy Roman Empire."

"With my love," it had read. It was painfully adolescent of him, he knew that, but he had spent hours just tracing those lines with his fingertips, lovestruck and naïve with it.

Feliciano pulled the wool cape draped over his shoulders tighter, shivering as he made his way closer to the window (there was a small cast iron furnace down the hall with a pipe running through his bedroom, but this old house was terribly drafty). Kneeling on the bench below the sill, Feliciano peered out the window, rosary still draped around his hand. The man was wearing a thick black cloak, but as he got closer, his stark white hair became visible beneath his hood. Feliciano beamed, chest fluttering with excitement. He hadn't seen Gilbert in nearly a year, since he'd visited with Ludwig last winter. The implication had his heart singing. If Gilbert was here, than Ludwig was not far behind.

Feliciano raced down the halls. He practically flew down the stairs, navigating the well-travelled corridors with memorized ease until he made it out of the servants' quarters of the house. Already he could hear a buzz of voices coming from the grand foyer, the few servants employed in the house speaking to each other in hushed tones. Roderich and Erzsébet's voices soon joined the hum, speaking urgently as their footsteps echoed through the distant halls toward the main entrance. Feliciano hardly paid attention. For all he knew, Ludwig had come riding up the lane just after Feliciano had left the window. He could be walking up the front steps at that very moment.

One of the servants, a kind old widow called Marlene, passed him in the hall. She'd nearly walked right into him, barely having the mind to step around when he brushed her skirts. The woman stumbled for a moment, pausing just long enough for Feliciano to catch the wetness

on her cheeks. He stopped, watching her right herself and wipe hurriedly at her face. She didn't look at him. In fact, she seemed to be looking anywhere but him. Stock still in the middle of the wall, Feliciano's eyes never left her as she rounded the corner. The steady hum of voices were slowly dimming down to bare whispers, a haunting sound no louder than the wind rattling at the window panes. Something was wrong.

Feliciano felt the air drain out of the house. Every sound was muffled and dull, like a knock on the door in the dead quiet of the night. He moved slowly now, footsteps barely making a sound as he inched toward the foyer. Creeping slowly along the wall, Feliciano peered around the corner. Between the moulding of the wall and a marble bust, he could just see a sliver of the front door. Gilbert stood on the other side, hood pulled back and head low, as he spoke to Eizabeta and Roderich. Feliciano held his breath, afraid to breathe too loudly and give himself himself away. He dared not even brush the stray locks of auburn hair from his eyes, paralyzed in anticipation.

"Where is he now?" Roderich's tone was low and unsteady, watching the Prussian man in disbelief.

"We've brought him to Sankt Bacchus," Gilbert replied. Feliciano could barely see the man's face, but the tremor in his voice was enough to set his teeth on edge. "In all honesty… no one is quite certain what to do. This hasn't happened in centuries."

Erzsé spoke up then, her voice thick, a hair's breadth from breaking. " *How* did this happen, Gilbert?"

"He was told that Bonnefoy had been seen recently in the Rhineland," Gilbert began, heavy in his own guilt. "Somehow he got it into his head that if he fought and subdued him, took him into captivity, that it would help to bring a faster end to the War. He tried to argue his point to the Generals, to the other Kingdoms, but no one would listen – and with good reason, we couldn't mobilize an entire army on a rumour, and certainly not in time to capture France, but… the boy wouldn't *listen* . He left on his own. By the time I caught up with him…" Gilbert trailed off, jaw tensing as he shook his head and refused to speak further for the sake of his pride. The crack in his voice said enough, that "too late" suspended in the air.

A tight coil like a burning serpent had wound its way around Feliciano's chest, tightening with each breath he took until he could no longer take in air. His vision blurred, eyes stinging with acidic tears. Who were they talking about? It couldn't possibly be the one thing that could bring a tremor to Roderich's voice, or make a proud man like Gilbert bow his head in shame. That one thing was impossible, it was out of the question, so what *was* it? A single notion drifted through his thoughts, light as a ripple in a pond – that his body already knew the answer, while his heart just couldn't see the truth.

Erzsébet, hands held over her heart, released a harsh breath. A dark look overtook her features. "Who on Earth told him where Bonnefoy was?" she hissed.

There was a beat of silence. Gilbert closed his eyes as if in confession. "I did."

With a furious snarl, Erzsébet stepped forward, her heel on the marble floor echoing through the foyer like a gunshot. Before she could say anything, however, Roderich's hand was on her

shoulder. She stopped, head whipping around to glare up at him as he shook his head. “What does this mean for the Empire?” Roderich asked, turning his attention back to the Prussian.

“Damn the Empire!” Erzsébet argued, wrenching her shoulder out of Roderich’s grasp. “How can you think of that at a time like this?!”

“I am thinking only of preserving the living,” Roderich replied sharply, though there was no mistaking the heavy sadness in his voice. “We cannot do anything for him now. Gilbert,” he prompted the man again.

Gilbert exhale roughly through his nose, before straightening his back and facing Roderich eye to eye. “No one knows,” he explained. “Nothing has changed, the Empire itself is still intact, but… with Ludwig dead, I cannot see how it –”

A thunderous crash interrupted the exigent conversation. Every head turned in the direction of the corridor off the foyer – it took Feliciano a stunned moment to realize they were looking at him. It took him a stunned moment longer to realize that he’d started backing up and had knocked over the bust. He looked down at the shattered pieces of white marble at his feet. When his gaze rose up again, Roderich was approaching him like one might a frightened animal.

“Feliciano…” he began slowly. Erzsébet and Gilbert were rooted to the spot behind him, watching the exchange with breaths held.

Feliciano took another step back, tripping over the bust’s neck and stumbling to right himself. He shook his head, voice stolen from his throat. Though he opened his mouth, the words wouldn’t come.

Roderich held his hands out in front of him. “Feliciano, listen to me,” he said, slow and even in a way that felt entirely too false. “It’s going to be okay,” he continued as he advanced.

Feliciano just continued to shake his head, silently begging Roderich not to say it. It wasn’t possible, they were mistaken, he’d just heard from Ludwig three days ago, they were *mistaken* . But even as he tried to think his way out of this reality, a somber voice in the back of his head told him that the letters could have been written months ago, that he could have been reading the words of a deadman by candlelight for the past three nights. Feliciano didn’t realize that he was shaking until his back hit the wall behind him. Tears were already staining his cheeks, dripping from his chin and onto his shirt.

Roderich bent down on one knee. He kept a careful distance, each movement calculated with a mandatory calm. “I am sorry…. But –”

Feliciano ran. He turned, and before Roderich could get a hold of him, he sprinted down the hall. Anything to avoid hearing *that* . They were mistaken. Feliciano didn’t know how, or to what end, but they were mistaken. Unheeding of Roderich and Erzsébet calling after him, Feliciano ran. Their footsteps followed after him – but Feliciano was fast. With nowhere in mind to go but a desperate need to get out, to go *anywhere* but there, he raced through the kitchen, ripped the door open, and bolted out into the blistering cold.

Feliciano only stopped for a moment as he stumbled out into the snow. His lungs burned, each breath frosting into a cloud from his lips as he searched for an escape. At the side of the stable, Gilbert's horse had been tied to a temporary post, the rope loose and the steed shifting restlessly on its feet. Feliciano ran to the horse, throwing off its lead and climbing onto its back. The horse whined and nearly kicked Feliciano off, but with a pull at the reigns, he managed to guide it into a gallop down the lane. They were mistaken. *He* was mistaken in fearing the worst. With desperation to prove it to himself, he rode out toward Sankt Bacchus.

The sun was already low over the mountains, casting long shadows through the forest trails. Bare tree branches stretched over the path, gnarled hands reaching out to grab him at any cursed moment. The shouts of his superiors at the estate had long since faded, overpowered by the roar of Feliciano's quivering heart. He rode up the side of the mountain, urging the horse faster, cape dragging out behind him. The high walls of the town drew taller up ahead. Feliciano did not urge the steed to slow down or pause even a moment. A group of villagers scattered, shouting their fear and outrage as Feliciano ran through the middle of them, beneath the iron gates and into the fortified down.

The horse couldn't make it up the steep incline of Sankt Bacchus' ridge. With a cry, the horse skidded to a stop at the base of the ridge, rearing back on its hind legs. Feliciano flew off, hitting the cobblestone with a bruising impact, but did not otherwise waste a second. As if in a race against the setting sun, Feliciano took off up the hill.

When he made it to the crest of the ridge, several men in long black garbs were just exiting the Cathedral. Feliciano pushed himself faster, shoving himself past one of the men just before the massive oak doors shut behind him. He staggered to a stop, all at once breathless and unable to breathe as the outside world closed at his back. Left only in the isolation of the empty church, Feliciano felt his soul pull back from his body, flying off somewhere far and safe from here as he stared down the sanctuary of the Cathedral.

It smelled of roses. The pews and pillars of the nave were lined with candles, bathing the church in a flickering amber glow. The sun had finally set and left the stained glass windows dark. And all the while, all Feliciano could focus on was the scent of roses. He looked down at his left hand, where his rosary was still wrapped around his wrist, twisting between his fingers, beads carving indents into his palm. The scent was too strong. His gaze lifted deliberately toward the sanctuary again, where sitting on the altar, a crude wood casket was surrounded with dried flowers. Feliciano took a dream-like step forward, his leg nearly buckling beneath him. Then he took another, and another, until he was running down the aisle. Skidding onto his knees before the altar, Feliciano's cloak billowed out around him. He came like a beggar to the divine, and what he saw was anything but holy. Feliciano knew what death looked like. He could not ignore the evidence of his eyes. Lying in the casket, too pale for sleep, Ludwig's empty body clasped his rosary against his still heart.

Feliciano screamed at the top of his lungs. It was a cry pulled straight from his core, a throat-filleting scream that echoed off the vaulted ceilings like a choir. It was a violent prayer, a plea to that deaf God sitting high above the altar. It was loud enough to rock through the heavens, but not enough to wake the dead. Feliciano sobbed like he'd never before, curled over the rosary in his hand as he held it to his chest. Give him anything but this. Take his country, take

his name, take his immortal soul, but *give him back.* The only sound to answer Feliciano's cries was his own echo, resounding off every wall as Ludwig lie tranquil in death.

Chapter 5

Dusseldorf, 1806.

It was a balmy morning in early August when Gilbert Beilschmidt found a boy lying on the eastern bank of the Rhine. The air was thick and humid, the sky hazy with the heat, and the boy was laying face down in the coarse sand.

This was, of course, far from Gilbert's intention when he'd set out on his walk that morning. He'd woken up in a foul mood, with no appetite to speak of. So, he'd left the rooms he was renting before the first light of dawn, when the city was still and dark, and the heat had not yet crept up in the wake of the sun. Today, as he'd been told in a letter several weeks ago from Roderich, was the day that Napoleon would officially dissolve the Holy Roman Empire. Honest to God, Gilbert was only surprised it had taken so damn long. The boy had been dead for a century and a half already. The Empire had been a shell of itself ever since. It was about time the whole thing was laid to rest.

Geopolitics aside, the news did bring up an acidic taste in Gilbert's mouth. He'd woken up that morning with a bitter disposition. Old grief and guilt had been lying dormant in his bones for over a hundred years, and that morning had clawed its way out of his marrow while he lay on his back staring at the moonlight casting shadows on his ceiling. Gilbert never pretended to be all that close to the kid – hell, he'd been fighting against him up until five years before he was killed. Still, he'd gotten attached. The boy had been his responsibility. That was the end of it. Waking up that morning to crisp moonlight and the reminder of his failure had, understandably, put him off. So, he'd gotten out of bed, and before the sun could breach the horizon, he'd set out on a walk to clear his head.

All that taken into consideration, this wasn't precisely what Gilbert had in mind. He'd nearly walked right past him, and would have missed the boy entirely if it hadn't been for the head of blond hair that caught his attention, standing out in contrast to the rough, grey sand. Gilbert had paused, looking around in search of what he expected was either a wounded animal or a lost drunkard stumbling back toward the city. Here on the foot paths outside of town, it wasn't uncommon to find either.

That was when he'd caught a glimpse of the body lying out on the river bank. Dead, he assumed at first. Pushing back through a thick patch of bushes, Gilbert made his way down toward the water, pausing only when a pathetic groan came from the body. So, likely not dead, but probably not far from it either. Gilbert approached with a degree of caution, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt before he crouched down several meters back. From what he could see, the kid was about 17 years old, with a hardy stature and boyish features. He was laying with one cheek on the ground, soaked to the bone and stark naked. Sitting on his haunches, Gilbert rested his elbows on his knees and tilted his head as he appraised the boy.

“Hey,” he called out, hoping that his voice alone would be enough to rouse him. “Are you alright?” Stupid question in retrospect, but in all his centuries he’d never exactly been in a mirror situation. The boy didn’t respond, but his voice did elicit another groan. Gilbert frowned, finally reaching out to take hold of the boy’s shoulder and flip him onto his back.

The moment his palm touched the boy’s skin, he knew. It was enough to make him recoil, falling on his backside as he retracted his hand. It was an instantaneous sensation, with no other way to describe it than *knowing* . A volt of lightning, arcing between the young man’s body and his hand, a voice seeping like smoke into his head, whispering to his mind – he just knew. This boy wasn’t mortal. This boy was like him.

Rolled onto his back, the boy squeezed his eyes for a moment, wincing at the rough sand scraping at his skin. After a moment, he opened his eyes, a dull haze clearing into ethereal blue, staring up at the unsaturated sky. His chest rose and fell slowly, as if testing them for the first time, before a horrible cough came over him. The boy turned onto his side, hacking up a lungful of water onto the river bank.

Gilbert watched this all in a state of shock. He couldn’t deny it – there was a familiarity in the kid that made his stomach clench. On today of all days, that couldn’t be a coincidence – impossible, of course, Holy Rome was dead, but the similarities in this young man’s features, albeit older, were unmistakable.

Urging himself to recover, Gilbert righted himself onto his knees and leaned forward, bracing the boy as he tried to sit upright. “Who the hell are you?” he asked, more than a little apprehensive at this development. He didn’t know what it meant yet, what new nation this boy would become, and what that meant for him and the other German states – for all he knew, this boy was an omen of death for him.

Finally upright and breathing easily, an unnerving calm came over the boy. He blinked slowly, eyes tracking around his environment as if Gilbert weren’t there at all. His hand came up to rest over his chest, feeling the heart beat beneath it, and the rise and fall of his ribcage with every breath. He then held his hands out in front of him, turning them over and flexing his fingers as if he’d never used them before.

It was only then that Gilbert noticed the rosary in his left hand. The beads were stone dry, while the rest of his body was still damp from washing up on the river. With a century passed since he’d last seen the rosary, it took a few moments for Gilbert to recognize it.

The how and the why suddenly didn’t matter. Gilbert accepted the evidence of his own eyes, but for the sake of his sanity, put a hault on the burning questions eating through the grey flesh of his mind at that moment. He’d take this in stride – there was no other option. Under the oppressive heat of the morning sun, Gilbert stared at the boy in dismay. “Who are you?” he repeated.

The boy blinked, still taking in his surroundings with a raw gaze. “I’m… I’m not sure.”

Gilbert exhaled slowly. “Do you know *what* you are?” he asked.

Frowning, the boy finally looked Gilbert in the eyes. Gilbert felt a chill shoot down his spine. “I’m like you,” the boy said. “Where am I?”

Gilbert did not respond immediately. There was a reason this boy, with his uncanny resemblance and the timing of his appearance, had washed up on this river. There was a reason that Gilbert had been the one to find him. It had been many centuries since Gilbert had considered himself a very religious man – too many wars fought in the name of God had left him tired. Still, there was no denying that at this moment, he could feel stars aligning over his head. Gilbert pushed himself to his feet, extending his hand down to the young man. “Let’s worry about getting you through town without being arrested before anything else.”

By some miracle, Gilbert did manage to smuggle the boy unto town. He’d taken off his shirt and allowed the young man to wear it, but it was still enough to draw a little too much attention. However, with a few back alleys through the city, and a glare at one offended looking old woman, he succeeded in getting the boy to his rented rooms. There, he gave the young man a proper set of clothes. Gilbert was just a bit larger than him, but they would serve well for now until Gilbert could figure out to do. His mind was still racing, turning over a thousand possibilities and explanations and still coming up blank.

Well. Nothing to do in the moment but live in it. Once he’d recovered from the initial shock, Gilbert found the rest quite easy. Taking a bottle and two glasses from his cabinet, Gilbert walked over to the small table where the boy said fiddling with the rosary in his hands. He set the glasses down, the light clink just barely disturbing the oppressive silence. Gilbert paused, looking between the bottle and the boy. After an internal debate over the boy’s approximate age, given the slight fullness of his cheeks and his wide eyed gaze (and whether or not it mattered in the first place,) Gilbert poured out half the bottle into the boy’s glass.

The boy frowned, picking up the glass and gazing at it warily as the foam at the top fizzled down. “What is it?” he asked.

“Spruce beer,” Gilbert replied with a shrug as he took a swing from his own glass. “Drink it. If it’s fine enough for children, an hour-year-old Nation ought to be fine too.” Though he seemed unconvinced, the boy took a hesitant slip, instantly making a disgusted face. Gilbert, despite the complicated situation, couldn’t help but laugh. “You’ll get used to it.”

The young man nodded, taking one unsure appraisal of the glass, before drinking from it again. He’d known Gilbert for a sum total of an hour, and already seemed to trust him blindly. It was more than a little daunting. Then again, the boy had known Gilbert his whole life at the same time.

Gilbert leaned forward, elbows on the table and hands curled loosely around his glass. “You said you know what you are,” he began. “Do you know what that means?”

The boy seemed to consider the question for a moment. A horse drawn carriage passed along the cobblestone street outside, and the shadow of it fell over the both of them through the veil of the white curtains pulled over the window. “I am what you are,” the boy finally answered. He looked down into the glass, watching the bubbles rise to the surface. “I am the sum total of a people and the land they live in.”

Gilbert leaned in further. “Yes, but what does that *mean* ?” he pressed.

Lifting his gaze from the glass, the boy looked up at Gilbert from beneath a fringe of pale blond locks and simply shrugged.

Gilbert sighed in frustration. He leaned back heavily into his chair, bringing his glass to his mouth and throwing back half of it before coming away for breath. “Damn,” was all he said at first. He wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. “I was hoping you’d have the answer to that, what with you being… new and all,” Gilbert said with a wave of his hand. “No one’s been able to quite figure it out.”

“There are more of us?” the boy asked.

“Yes,” Gilbert replied. With a dissatisfied look at the half empty glass in his hand, he stood up and cross back over to his cabinet for another bottle. “You’ll meet all of them someday – or most of them, I suppose.”

“What are they like?”

“Bastards.”

Opening the cabinet door, Gilbert selected a similar bottle, this one brand new, and began uncorking it. As he worked the screw into the soft cork, he couldn’t help but glance back at the mysterious boy, and the rosary in his hand. He could smell the rose perfume from where he stood, and the rubies managed to catch even the dim morning light through the curtains. “Why do you have that?”

The boy frowned as he glanced down at the rosary. He couldn’t seem to answer.

“Never mind,” Gilbert shook his head. “Well, we’ll figure out what to do with you. You must have something to do with Napoleon’s damned confederation – no offense. I’ll take you with me to Berlin to see the Kaiser. We’ll get you a name, and –”

“Ludwig.”

Gilbert stiffened, turning from the bottle to stare at the young man. “What did you say?”

The boy shrugged. “My name is Ludwig,” he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“And how do you know that?”

Again, the boy only shrugged.

Helpful. And terrifying. Gilbert turned his back on Ludwig, swallowing hard. The stars were at a needle’s point above his head. Staring at his reflection in the glass door of the cabinet, Gilbert all at once stood a little straighter. He faced himself with a renewed sense of pride and determination. This was redemption, whether he’d been looking for it or not. And this time, he wasn’t going to cock it up.

In the reflection, he caught Ludwig looking up at him from his glass. “Who are you?”

Gilbert turned to face him. “I’m your brother.”

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Berlin, 1860’s

Gilbert stood tight-lipped and stiff as he listened to the Chancellor speak down to him. It took about every ounce of limited self-control he had not to snap. The more he listened to this man speak out of his own ass, the heavier became the presence of a cast-iron ball behind his teeth –opening his mouth would set him off like a canon. He’d left Ludwig at home with a swarm of nurses and a stubborn prayer that morning. The boy hadn’t been conscious in days. He’d always been rather sickly, but with the end of yet another power struggle between the warring states, his health had declined rapidly. Gilbert was running out of options. His desperation was growing.

“The Union will never work,” the Chancellor said with dismissive wave. “Confederation is out of the question. There is no chance of getting the southern states to join us.”

Gilbert sucked in a breath through his nose, swallowing the taste of gunpowder and metal before he dared to speak. “And why not?” he asked through gritted teeth.

A Nobleman to Gilbert’s left spoke up. The room was filled with self-important politicians and nobles, with all the pomp and circumstance that came with them, as they stood in the Kaiser’s throne room. This one in particular had been grating on Gilbert’s nerves all afternoon. A Baron, Gilbert was fairly certain. He’d brought his son with him to learn the ways of the court, a pompous brat that had whined about being bored every time he’d opened his mouth. Gilbert’s patience, needless to say, was already tissue-thin. “We may have won control over the German territories from Austria, but the Confederation is too weak. It will never last.”

“If we don’t make this work, he will die,” Gilbert snarled.

“Then the boy will die,” the Baron rolled his eyes. “What does it matter? The Confederation will fail, and he will die. That is what you and your kind *do* .”

And just like that, all of the tension drained from Gilbert’s body. The picture of calm, Gilbert considered the man’s words, and nodded. “Yes. Alright,” he replied thoughtfully, and then promptly drew his sword from the decorative sheath of his dress uniform. Before anyone had the time to react, Gilbert had rushed forward and grabbed the Baron’s son by the collar, dragging him back in a tight grp and holding the blade of his sword against the boy’s neck.

The room burst into an uproar, but no one dared to go after Gilbert when he had the Baron's son held hostage. Everyone instantly took a step back.

"Have you lost your mind?!" the Baron shouted.

Still maintaining his eerie, casual air, Gilbert only shrugged. "What does it matter?" he asked in a bored tone. "Each and every one of you, you all live such short and insignificant lives. You are only mortal. I have seen things you cannot fathom. I have seen Kingdoms and Empires rise and fall. I have seen the worst of Saints and the best of Sinners, and it has all passed to me in the blink of an eye. So *, what does it matter?* " Gilbert pressed the blade of his sword against the boy's neck just hard enough to draw a trickle of blood.

The Baron pleaded, voice shrill and demanding. "Stop! Stop this at once, you'll kill him!"

"Then he will die," Gilbert echoed with a predatory tilt of his head. "After all, that is what you and your kind *do* ."

Not a single breath could be heard in the Great Hall. Gilbert had made his point. With a snarl, Gilbert withdrew his sword and threw the boy at his father's feet. He sheathed the sword again, and as an afterthought, took the handkerchief out of his pocket and tossed it at trembling boy.

"The Confederation *will* work," Gilbert said matter-of-factly as he straightened his uniform lapel. "You will ensure that it does."

"Beilschmidt," The Chancellor finally spoke again, hesitant as he stepped toward him. "Confederation will not necessarily ensure that… *he* lives."

Gilbert turned on his heel with a snarl. "I don't care," he snapped as he walked toward the doors. "Give him all of Prussia if you have to. See to it that he survives."

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Austria, Present Day

The car rolled to a stop outside the wide white arcs of the Salzburg Train Station at 10pm. Roderich stifled a yawn as he put the car in park. Feliciano watched from the reflection in the window as he reached down to the cupholder in the centre console and took a sip of coffee from his travel mug. He acknowledged that he should probably open the door now, get out and let Roderich get back on the road. He needed to check in for his train soonm anyway. Still, Feliciano just couldn't bring himself to move. He still sat with his forehead pressed up against the window pain, the glass cold and biting into his skin.

“Feliciano,” Roderich half-whispered, reaching across the seat to lay his hand on his shoulder. “We’re here.”

Feliciano exhaled, but did eventually nod and shift to sit upright. He couldn’t sit in this car all night. Reaching out to the door, he wrapped his fingers around the handle, but at the last moment, found he just couldn’t bring himself to open it yet.

Roderich, of course, noticed his hesitation. He squeezed Feliciano’s shoulder. “If you’re waiting for me to tell you not to go, you know that I’m not going to.”

A dry laugh rose like dust from Feliciano’s chest. “You really know how to make a person feel better, Roderich.”

Roderich only smiled. “I mean that you know I’m not going to tell you what to do. I tried that for centuries, and never got you to listen,” he said, drawing a more genuine laugh from Feliciano. “If you believe that this is the right thing to do, then you need to do it.”

Feliciano slumped back against his seat with a huff, letting his head roll to the side to look out the window again. “I know that I can’t stay with him,” he sighed. “But… this doesn’t feel right.”

Of course it didn’t feel right, Feliciano thought to himself bitterly. He’d booked his train ticket as soon as he went back inside the house. Packed in a hurry, shoving all of his clothes and belongings back into his suitcase, and asked Roderich to drive him to the station. He hadn’t even gone down for dinner, let alone said goodbye to Ludwig. If he weren’t such a coward, he would have looked Ludwig in the eye and broke things off with some excuse before he’d left – but Feliciano had known that he never would have been able to do it if he saw Ludwig again. So, he left in the night without a word, and had never felt so sick to his stomach over it.

Well, whether or not it felt right, there was no going back now. Feliciano shook his head before Roderich could try to respond. Finally, he pulled the door handle and pushed it open, slipping out as a harsh gust of wind blew snow down the pavement. Roderich followed Feliciano out, helping him get his suitcase from the backseat. Feliciano hugged him goodbye, offered his thanks for the ride into the city, and without giving Roderich the chance to say another word, took his suitcase and headed inside with his head down against the wind.

In short order, Feliciano was checked in and found himself sitting out on the platform, waiting for his train to pull in. He bundled his scarf a little tighter around his neck to keep the heat from escaping. He was seated underneath a sort of canopy, the white arches and beams holding up a mock roof while the sky was open and clear over the tracks. Snow fell gently down through the gap from a dark indigo sky, illuminated only by the lights of the surrounding city. The station was nearly abandoned at this hour. Only a few other people were waiting for their trains, but otherwise, it was entirely silent.

So perhaps that was why Feliciano was so entranced when distant voices and instruments began to play. He stood up from his bench, taking a few steps forward and looking around in every direction. The sound was quiet and lovely in the tranquil night, echoing off the tall glass windows of the station. He at last spotted a group of carolers passing by on the street

outside – performing for no one in particular, just singing and playing for their own amusement as they walked through the city. Right. Feliciano had almost forgotten. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. The station was wide and empty, and Feliciano stood there listening to the echo of the music. Already, the loneliness was settling in, like a drop of black ink in water as it spread through his veins.

“Feliciano.”

That deep baritone had Feliciano’s heart stopping cold in chest. A soft wind drifted down from the sky, swirling snow around him as he slowly turned to look over his shoulder. Ludwig was walking toward him, dressed in his smart grey coat. Feliciano took a staggered step back, eyes wide and fearful as he met the blond’s icy blue gaze. Ludwig’s expression was tight, brow low, and the look alone had Feliciano’s stomach tightening.

“L-Ludwig,” he stuttered. “What are you doing here?”

Ludwig slowed down as he approached, leaving a good few metres of distance between them. “You left the window open on Roderich’s computer when you bought your train tickets,” he replied.

For a long moment, the two of them just stood there, bare wisps of snow swirling around them. Feliciano couldn’t breathe through the vice winding its way tighter and tighter around his chest. Ludwig’s gaze was too heavy, and he could feel it weighing down on him, making him feel small and afraid and everything he’d selfishly been trying to avoid in leaving. He should have known it would come back to haunt him.

“What is going on?” Ludwig just barely put a crack in the silence, his voice at a low murmur as his face softened.

Feliciano’s mouth went dry. He tried to swallow, feeling his throat ache. “I’m going back to Venice.”

Ludwig frowned, taking a step forward, only to pause when Feliciano took an equal step back. “Why?”

“It’s not important,” Feliciano looked away. “I just - I have to leave. That’s all.”

Ludwig didn’t buy it for a moment. The ever present “why” was put to the side for now. Feliciano could see him struggling to wrap his head around this. “And you were really just going to leave without saying a word?” he asked.

Closing his eyes, Feliciano drew in a breath through his nose and exhaled as the wind continued to blow softly around him. “Coming here was a mistake,” he said. His voice cracked with the last word.

“What do you mean?”

The whistle of an approaching train interrupted their moment of tension. Feliciano looked behind him as the train to Venice pulled in along the tracks. He shook his head, nervously

fumbling in his pockets for his ticket. “Ludwig, I’m sorry, I- I don’t have time for this,” he said as he reached into the pocket of his trousers. “My train is here, I have to-”

Feliciano pulled his ticket out of his pocket, but the moment he did, the rosary he’d forgotten had been tucked inside flew out onto the platform. It fell with a light clatter to the ground, skidding to a stop at Ludwig’s feet. Feliciano swore he stopped breathing all together as Ludwig stooped down to pick it up. His strong hands handled it so delicately. Ludwig brushed his fingertips over the rosary, lifting the rose scent from the beads.

“This... this is mine,” Ludwig murmured, brows knotting at the centre in a troubled frown. There was a visible moment when he remembered leaving it on his nightstand in Munich, and the morning that Feliciano had asked about it as they drove to Austria. Ludwig looked up with something bordering betrayal in his eyes. “Why did you take it?”

Feliciano completely froze. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. The train whistle blew again behind him. “I-I can’t explain right now, Ludwig, I just - it’s not what you think-” the train whistle blew again. Feliciano shook his head. Spinning around, he grabbed the handle of his suitcase and prepared to make a run for it. “I have to go.”

Ludwig pocketed the rosary, growing bolder with a looming step toward Feliciano. He reached out and grabbed Feliciano’s wrist, holding him in place. Even when he was angry and confused, his grip was tender. “You owe me an explanation,” he demanded. “After everything - Munich, the Christmas Market, everything you said, you owe me that much.”

Feliciano paused. Ludwig wasn’t going to let this go, he realized. The man was a stubborn as they come. Feliciano could not escape and leave this behind open ended. Fine. Feliciano would be cruel if he had to be. If it meant protecting Ludwig from him, he would be cruel. Even as this resolution hardened his heart, a tear slipped down Feliciano’s cheek. He turned and faced Ludwig with a blank expression.

“I don’t owe you anything, Ludwig” he said. “It was just sex. Can’t you get that through your head? It didn’t mean anything. I’m... I’m sorry you believed otherwise, but it didn’t mean anything. I’ve moved on. You need to do the same.”

Ludwig’s hold around Feliciano’s wrist loosened. His shoulders dropped, and Feliciano could see the way the breath left him at his harsh words. “I don’t understand...” he said. “When I told you at the Christmas Market that I’d understand if you’d rather forget it, you said -”

“I lied,” Feliciano said though his teeth. He had to swallow down a sob, eyes red and cheeks wet. “I didn’t mean it - or I changed my mind, I don’t know, I -”

The German cut him off before he could stammer out another excuse. “Feliciano, why are you doing this?”

Ludwig didn’t believe him. In spite of everything Feliciano was saying, in spite of him leaving, Ludwig did not believe a word of it. That was what hurt the most. Ludwig was still nothing but kind. He still knew that Feliciano loved him. That was the one thing that he did not doubt. He was only confused about why exactly Feliciano was lying to him. Loyal to a fault, as always.

The train whistle blew for last call. Feliciano yanked his wrist free of Ludwig's hold, but Ludwig caught him by the forearm before he could run. In a last, desperate effort to get through to him, Ludwig pulled Feliciano close, his other hand firm and steady on his cheek as he kissed him. Feliciano whimpered, flooding with warmth. The suitcase slipped out of his fingers. He hesitated. God, he nearly kissed him back.

He had to finish this. So, wrenching himself away, Feliciano reared back and slapped Ludwig across the cheek. The sound echoed off the high glass walls of the station. Feliciano's hand was left stinging terribly. Taking his suitcase again, Feliciano walked away and boarded the train. Ludwig was left frozen, cheek turning red, standing on the platform. It was only when Feliciano had taken his seat in his private cabin that he allowed himself to break down. He covered his mouth with his hands, sobbing into his burning palm. As the train pulled out of the station, he watched out the window as Ludwig slowly lifted his hand to his cheek. Their eyes met through the glass. Feliciano looked away.

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His train pulled into Venice at 4am. Feliciano stepped out of the station, the Grand Canal still and quiet at this haunting hour. The water lapped at the docks, and boats rocked gently on their lines. It was rare to see the city so empty, devoid of crowds and tourists. The moon glistened on the water. Austria's bitter cold and snow was replaced with a mild chill, and puddles on wet stone from the rain hours earlier. Feliciano decided to blame the high waters for the pain in his chest.

Crossing the canals along small bridges, and navigating the alleys and narrow streets of the island, Feliciano dragged himself home. His apartment in Venice was spacious and lofty, and he'd lived there for years - but as he fiddled with his key in the lock and pushed the door open, it suddenly felt foreign and empty. It took him far too long to realize why it felt so off - he hadn't decorated for Christmas. He'd thought he'd be in Austria and hadn't bothered. Now the flat felt barren and uninviting, the cool darkness biting into him. Feliciano dropped his suitcase and locked the door behind him. Kicking off his shoes and shedding his coat, he entered his bedroom and collapsed onto his bed. He didn't bother changing out of his clothes before he fell asleep.

Which, of course, he strongly regretted when he woke up five hours later, feeling uncomfortable and dirty. The sunlight was barely strong enough to pierce through his curtains. Feliciano woke to the dim light and the sound of voices on the street, groaning as he pushed himself upright. For a long moment, he just sat there. Everything just seemed - colourless, and he knew how melodramatic and depressing that sounded, but it was true. In the winter light of the morning, the apartment was desaturated and dull. Feliciano scrubbed his hand over his face. He sat there for ten minutes before forcing himself to get up and take a shower.

He thought the hot water might help lift his mood. It didn't, but it was a faint hope anyway. Feliciano found himself just moving through his morning routine, a phantom in his own

home. He dried and dressed, and made himself breakfast, and sat at the table with his chin in his hand, swirling the foamy milk into his Misto until the bubbles were gone and his first sip was cold. It was the oddest thing. He just wasn't sure what to do with himself now. The holidays would pass, he knew that, and soon enough the New Year would begin. He'd be going back to meetings, spending time in Rome and Florence and wherever he was needed. He had some restoration and conversations projects on old paintings to work on, so that would keep him busy. In his spare time he could work on a few of his own paintings, or write some new music for violin, or create *anything* . That was what he did, what he was good at. He just couldn't bring himself to even imagine moving from this chair and from his cold coffee in the dull winter morning.

Realistically, it shouldn't be so hard, he knew that. He'd go back to doing exactly what he'd been doing for the past decade since he'd first ended his relationship with Ludwig. Eventually, he'd been happy. The pain and guilt and longing had been manageable. Now, he'd gone and emotionally lacerated himself. Maybe he'd heal again, but for now, he was going to hurt.

By noon, Feliciano was debating going back to sleep. The coffee had been a mistake, had made him more jittery and anxious than awake, and he was still exhausted from the trip back. He swore his hand still stung. So, dumping his coffee in his kitchen sink, Feliciano had been about to head back into his bedroom when he heard a knock on the door. It seemed impossibly loud in the oppressive silence. Feliciano felt the impact of it in his bones. He moved slowly, tip toeing barefoot across the floor, until he was close enough to peak through the peephole in the door. Feliciano wasn't sure who he had expected on the other side, but it certainly hadn't been him.

When he opened the door, Francis Bonnefoy was standing in the hall. Dressed in a light, tan overcoat and a white scarf, with his hair pulled back in an effortlessly tousled bun, he smiled at the awestruck Italian.

It took a moment of opening and closing his mouth in dumb silence for Feliciano to speak. "Francis? What are you doing here?"

Francis shrugged, hands in his pockets. "Gilbert called me," he replied. "I flew down from Paris first thing this morning."

Still not quite understanding, Feliciano shook his head. "Wha- why would he do that?"

"It would seem he had the insane idea that I might be able to help you, somehow," Francis' smile softened. "He explained everything already. Although I might argue the irony here, that I should be the last person you want to talk to, but-"

Feliciano didn't allow him to finish. Maybe he was just tired, and over emotional, and his head was too chaotic to think straight, but he was too lonely to care much. Feliciano threw his arms around the Frenchman. Francis hardly even stumbled, arms open the moment Feliciano broke down.

They ended up taking a walk. It took a great deal of coaxing from Francis to get Feliciano to leave his apartment, but in the end, he was glad that he did. The fresh air, at the very least,

was better than the stagnancy of his flat. The streets weren't as crowded in the winter, with most tourists coming to clog the canals in the summertime, but the Venetians were out enjoying the mild weather. The sky was overcast enough to turn on the solar lamps, casting a warm orange glow against the grey-blue sky. Eventually, they ended up at the Piazzetta di San Marco, the open space between the basilica and the water. Francis leaned into the wind coming in off the canal, folding his arms against the rail at the edge of the lagoon.

"I know that Gilbert can be harsh when it comes to his brother," he broke the companionable silence between himself and the younger Nation, "but he does still care about you. Otherwise, he never would have asked me to check in on you."

Feliciano curled his arms around himself, leaning back against the rail. He stared down at his frosted reflection in a puddle at his feet. "After what I did - he should hate me. I would understand if he did."

Francis glanced back at Feliciano from over his shoulder. "But he doesn't. I don't think he ever really could. He may not show it often, but he's as soft as they come," he added with a light laugh in the hope that it would make Feliciano do the same. Still, Feliciano was silent, lost in his own reflected gaze. Francis sighed and looked back out at the lagoon. "Though I suppose he isn't as well - adapted to dealing with matters of the heart. Not in any productive manner, anyway," he continued. Again, no response from Feliciano. "Feli, talk to me, please."

Feliciano released a pitiful sigh, unable to get a word out before he felt his eyes tearing up. He squeezed his eyes shut against the sting, rubbing his palm over his face in frustration. "I don't even know what to say," he confessed. "I just feel so horrible and selfish. The worst part is that I can't tell Ludwig the truth. I have to let him think I don't love him."

Francis paused, thinking over his response with an innate care and sensitivity. "The heart wants what the heart wants," he said. "As painfully cliche as it may sound, there is a solid truth in that. You are *anything* but horrible and selfish for falling in love."

Though he did not entirely believe that just yet, Feliciano nodded, sniffling back his tears as he wiped his sleeve beneath his eyes. "It's just not fair. I know I sound like a petulant child, but it's *not,"* his voice cracked.

For a long moment, Francis just watched him. Feliciano couldn't bring himself to meet his gaze, but he could feel the Frenchman's eyes burrowing into him, stripping him away layer by layer until he was bare and laid open. All of his mistakes and sins were being counted and valued, and Feliciano was quite certain he was going to go mad - but he didn't argue it. He didn't snap in anger and tell Francis to leave him alone. He just didn't have it in him. Whether he believed he deserved this, or he just didn't have the nerve, he stayed silent and allowed Francis to be his judge.

But when Francis spoke again, his voice was kind, and soft. "Feliciano," he began. "Listen to me. When I killed that boy-"

"Francis, please don't."

“No, listen to me,” he repeated, raising his hand to silence the Italian’s protests. “When I killed that boy, it was a terrible, cowardly thing. He came after me, and he was naive enough to think taking me down personally would bring an end to that war. He was young, and desperate, and never intended to kill me... but I was afraid. I valued my freedom over all else, and in that vital moment, I panicked. When I realized what I had done... I tried to staunch the bleeding, but it was too late. Only a Nation can kill another Nation, and I killed him out of fear,” Francis hesitated there, dropping his head and closing his eyes as if reliving that moment. “I can never forgive myself for that. No matter what has transpired between Ludwig and I over the last century, no matter how many wars we’ve fought against each other, I can never allow myself to forgive what I did. However... I can accept that it was in the past.”

Pushing off the rail, Francis stood upright and laid his hand on Feliciano’s shoulder. “I was a coward, but Feliciano, despite what anyone may say, you are one of the bravest men I’ve ever known. To have loved and lost so much, and to be able to love again, takes a great heart. Ludwig *will* forgive you some day. These things don’t last forever.” Feliciano, not for the first time that day, couldn’t find his voice. Francis’ conviction was so strong in his words that he could help but believe him. The Frenchman squeezed his shoulder. “Come back to Paris with me,” Francis pressed on. “You shouldn’t be alone for the holidays.”

Feliciano exhaled through his nose. “Okay.”

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The house was heavy. Ludwig noticed it immediately when he woke up that morning. He’d gotten home from Salzburg late that night before, when everyone else had either retired to bed, or were avoiding him entirely. How much they knew of what happened, he wasn’t certain. What he did know is that when he came down for breakfast that morning (later than was usual for on account of laying in bed and staring at the ceiling just trying to summon the will to get up), no one would meet his gaze. He would catch them staring when they thought he couldn’t see, but as soon as he looked back, they would smartly snap their eyes in another direction.

He would imagine that they had realized he’d gone after Feliciano last night when Roderich got home and he was gone. That act alone spoke loud enough. Whether or not they had clued into his relationship with Feliciano rekindling or not, they certainly knew now. Maybe that was why Feliciano left. For whatever reason, he had been so paranoid about keeping it a secret. He’d never shied away from public relationships or affections in the past. What had changed? Every time that train of thought started up again, Ludwig promptly shut it down. He would drive himself insane, wondering what went wrong.

It was difficult not bare some resentment. Roderich had been the one to drive Feliciano to the train station. No one had bothered to tell him what was going on. They’d known, and they’d let Feliciano leave without saying a word. It wasn’t their fault, he knew that. Feliciano had made his choice. If they’d figured out the state of their relationship, however short lived it

had been, it wasn't their place to interfere. He couldn't blame them for his frustrations with Feliciano.

Well. No use dwelling on it. Ludwig had moved on once, he could do it again. He was not the type of man to wallow in self-pity, or lose himself to longing. He would get through the holidays, and life would return to normal.

So, he at least tried to be productive in his grief. There was no changing his sour mood, no matter how many times he told himself to get over it, so he excused himself for a walk after breakfast. The moment he walked outside, the cold bit into his skin like a slap to the face. The visual was not at all helpful. With squared shoulders and a stubborn determination to clear his mind, Ludwig headed out on the hiking trail. Of course, frustratingly enough, he found himself wandering the same path he'd taken with Feliciano the day before, the quiet forest trail winding through the rugged terrain, up toward the lookout point over the valley. So much for clearing his mind.

Standing at the crumbling wall, Ludwig stared out across the valley to the surrounding mountains. He watched as the sun burst through the clouds in thick beams of gold on the snow. As the clouds passed overhead, the sun spots dripped down into the valley, and passed over the mountains like waves on the sea. For a moment, Ludwig could imagine this place in the summertime, when the majesty of the summits were peaked in emerald green and wild flowers painted the riverbanks and hillsides with colour. The image was so visceral that he could almost feel the mild warmth of a sepia-toned afternoon. It felt *real* . He could picture himself leaning back against the rough trunk of a tree as Feliciano sat not far away, laughing with a voice like crystal - God, he really was pathetic, wasn't he? Ludwig banished the image. Shaking his head, he turned away from the view and made toward the path back to the house.

It was only for a passing second, but as he turned, his gaze was drawn up the side of the mountain to the abandoned Cathedral and surrounding village. The tall spires of the church stood over him like some dark siren in a sea of dark green pine. Just as he'd felt the day before, an almost gravitational pull beckoned him up there. He took one step toward the road up the mountain, before thinking better of it and forcing himself toward the opposite path. He was only chasing memories of Feliciano up there. That was what he told himself. It was no good.

Ludwig headed back to Roderich's house. He was still feeling rather solitary, but staying out in the freezing cold feeling sorry for himself wouldn't do any good. It was as he was just breaching the edge of the trail, where it opened up to the estate, that he heard the rumble of an engine. Ludwig made his way toward the house, coming up around the side of the stable just in time to see a familiar Volkswagen rolling down the drive toward the mountain road. Through the window as it passed, Ludwig caught Konrad's gaze. The elder man stared at him through the tint - for that fleeting moment, he felt a cold rush down his spine, piercing straight through his heart. There was hate in that man's eyes. But the moment was over so quickly, and the car gone just as soon, that Ludwig could only shake the lingering fear and convince himself he'd imagined it.

When Ludwig entered the house, Erzsébet was looking out the front window at the empty drive. Ludwig hung up his coat and shed his boots, but still, Erzsébet did not tear her troubled gaze away from the barren road. Ludwig frowned as he approached her. “Erzsé,” he called out. She jumped as his voice ripped her from deep thought, but quickly recovered. Ludwig’s frown only deepened. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no,” Erzsé answered with a wave of her hand. “Nothing at all. It’s just that Konrad left not long ago.”

“Yes, I saw him leaving just now.”

Erzsé nodded, casting one more glance toward the window before finally turning away. “I suppose he did say that he wouldn’t be staying long, but I hadn’t expected him to leave so soon, and without saying goodbye too.” Ludwig assumed his face gave away the sting he felt at that remark, because Erzsé quickly moved on - it would seem sudden departures were a theme of the day. “We were thinking about going down into town this afternoon,” she said. “Are you coming with us?”

Ludwig cleared his throat, shifting awkwardly on his feet as he struggled between being polite and *definitely* declining the offer. “I think I will stay inside for the day,” he replied. “I have some work that I have been meaning to catch up on. Maybe I will meet you all for dinner somewhere, if I’m finished.”

Erzsé looked for a moment like she wanted to argue, but she blessedly let it go. Instead, she nodded, offering him a tight smile as she patted him on the arm and passed him on her way to the parlour.

Standing alone in the middle of the foyer, Ludwig found himself feeling a little lost. He hadn’t been lying about the work he wanted to catch up on, but even he knew it wasn’t enough to keep him inside all day. Still, there wasn’t much else to occupy him for the time being. So, he headed up to his bedroom with no particular plan in mind. Anything, at that point, was better than standing in the middle of the grand entrance. However once he made it up the stairs, he simply didn’t stop at his own bedroom door. Without really thinking much of it, Ludwig found himself walking through the threshold of Feliciano’s empty bedroom. The bed had been made haphazardly, the blankets uneven and rumpled, the pillows scattered against the headboard with little care.

Nothing added up. It looked as if Feliciano had left in a hurry - panicked, almost. Ludwig carded his hand back through his hair, feeling his shoulders ache with tension he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. With a rough exhale, he let it go - or tried to, in any case. He was strung up, a cord had been wrung straight from the crown of his head, down his spine, and out through his arms and legs. Ludwig wasn’t used to feeling so out of control. Unsurprisingly, he was not a fan.

Ludwig entered the room slowly, surveying the mess left behind. He was only brought out of his thoughts by a knock on the door behind him.

“Hey,” Gilbert tapped his knuckle lightly against the wood, leaning against the threshhold. “Erzsé said you weren’t gonna come down into town with us. You sure I can’t change your

mind? I'll buy you a drink... and I promise I won't 'accidentally' forget my wallet," he added with a grin.

Ludwig shook his head. "I'm going to pass for tonight," was all he said. He didn't need to tell his brother why. It was an open secret at this point.

For once, Gilbert didn't argue. He didn't try to wrestle Ludwig out of the house, or tease him until he relented. Even he knew where the boundary lines were. "Sure thing," he replied. "Well, text me if you want us to get you something to eat on our way back." With that, he let well enough alone. He'd been two steps from the doorway, however, when he paused, and turned back. "Hey, Ludwig?"

"Yes?"

"You know I'd do anything for you, right?"

Ludwig blanched for a moment, the statement catching him so off guard that he found himself unable to respond for a minute. "What?" he frowned when he finally found his voice again

"Nothing," Gilbert shook his head, waving him off from over his shoulder as he walked away without another word.

The odd exchange left Ludwig dumbstruck. He stared out the doorway long after Gilbert had walked away, and his footsteps had faded into silence. Unsure of what to do himself after that, Ludwig took a seat at the edge of the bed. As he said down, he became aware of his rosary, still tucked into his back pocket from the night before. He shifted, reaching back to pull it out and examine it in the palm of his hand.

He'd taken it out the night before Feliciano came to visit in Munich. It had sat in that old box with his name on it since he'd taken it from Gilbert, tucked away in the back of his linen closet for months. Even now, he wasn't entire sure what had overcome in, when he'd taken it out and looked through its contents. A dream the night before, maybe. He always forgot them when he woke up, but had been left that morning with an unshakable urge to open it up. When he'd found the rosary inside, its perfume light and rubies glowing dimly from within the box -

Ludwig frowned. He had been certain that the rosary inside that box had been laid in with rubies on the golden crucifix. However, the rosary sitting in his hand was lined with emeralds. It was such a small detail, Ludwig hadn't noticed it when Feliciano dropped it at the train station. Ludwig brushed his fingertips over the rosary with a delicate touch that raced like fire across his skin. His rosary had rubies. This wasn't right. Ludwig's scowl deepened as he turned the rosary over, and for the first time, made sense of the inscription on the back - Sankt Bacchus.

.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

Francis sat on the bed while Feliciano repacked for Paris. He couldn't really say that he was excited to spend Christmas in France, there was still too much grief stuffed into his chest to allow room for it. However, there was a relief that at the very least he wouldn't be alone. In an case, just taking what he'd packed for Austria didn't feel quite right, so he unpacked his suitcase and picked out new clothes to bring with him on his last minute trip. Meanwhile, Francis lounged back across his haphazardly made bed, scrolling through his phone while he waited for Feliciano to finish getting ready.

"Mon cher, at this rate we won't make it to Paris before New Years Eve," Francis teased without looking up from his phone.

Feliciano looked back over his shoulder from his armoire, raising a critical brow at the Frenchman. "You're one to talk. You've never been on time for anything in your life."

Francis only shrugged. "Perfection takes time."

He was rewarded with a shirt thrown at his face.

Sputtering as he removed the offending article of clothing from his head, Francis struggled to recover the comment. "I only meant that you do not require so much time and effort to achieve that perfection!" he cried. "Your natural beauty outshines the very need."

"Yes, well, my inner beauty isn't going to keep me warm in France," Feliciano shook his head. "Just a few more minutes, I'm almost done." Taking his selected outfits from the armoire, he carried them back to the bed and began rearranging everything into his suitcase. "You have our flight booked?"

Francis nodded, humming under his breath as he pocketed his phone. "Yes, we'll take the ferry out to the mainland and the airport. However, if you do not hurry, we may have to swim." This time, as Feliciano threw a pair of trousers at him, Francis was prepared, He blocked it with a pillow, grinning in victory when he succeeded in making Feliciano laugh. Before he could say anything else, however, his phone began to vibrate in his pocket. Francis slipped off the bed, heading out of the bedroom and into the hallway to take the call.

Now that he was free of pestering, Feliciano turned his focus back on packing. He folded his clothes and rearranged them in his suitcase, going through the motions methodically until his fingers brushed something rough and round on the bottom. The scent of roses soon after lifted from the suitcase. Feliciano curled his fingers around it, dragging it up slowly from beneath the clothes he'd already packed away. When he turned his hand over, his rosary was sitting in his palm - no. This wasn't right. This wasn't *his* . It took Feliciano a moment to distinguish the difference - the rubies laid delicately into the gold cross. Feliciano felt it burn into the flesh of his palm, dread crawling up from his wrist and bleeding into his chest.

Francis' voice grew louder from out in the hall. Not a shout, per say, but his tone was deliberate, a forced calm that made Feliciano feel anything but. "No, he's not here," Francis spoke to whomever was on the other end of the call. "Yes, I'm certain, he'd have come straight here by now." Heart burning a hole straight through his throat, Feliciano stepped out

into the hall. Francis caught his gaze for only a moment before quickly turning away. “Listen, I am sure he will return soon, he-”

“Is it Ludwig?” Feliciano cut in, voice high with growing fear.

“I- Feli, hang on a moment,” Francis stammered as he tore his attention between two conversations. “Gilbert, he probably just wanted some time alone, there’s no reason to-”

Feliciano stepped in front of him, demanding the Frenchman’s attention. “Francis, is it Ludwig?” he pressed. Francis took a moment too long to answer. Impatience coming to a boiling point, Feliciano took the cell phone right out of Francis’ hands. He turned his back on Francis to block him from taking the phone back, hands shaking as he brought it to his ear and walked away. “Gilbert?”

Francis tried to grab at the phone, but Feliciano turned away again. “Feli, stop!”

“Hello? Francis, you there?” Gilbert’s voice was muffled and unclear through the phone - reception in the mountains was awful. He was probably back at Roderich’s house.

With Francis finally giving up hope on getting his phone back, Feliciano paced in front of his living room window, overlooking the gloomy canal. “Gilbert, is something wrong with Ludwig?”

“Wha-” Gilbert’s tone changed, and even through the poor connection, Feliciano could hear the anger in his voice. “Feliciano, give the phone back to Francis *right now* !” he ordered.

Feliciano refused to back down. “No! Tell me what’s happening, Gilbert!”

Gilbert cursed on the other end of the line, sounding as if he’d pulled the phone away from his ear for a moment. Feliciano held his breath as he waited for Gilbert to speak again, his lungs aching. “We can’t find him,” Gilbert at last admitted. “We just came back from town. He said he wanted to stay at the house, but we came back and his car was gone. We think he might be heading down to Venice. Listen, Feliciano, you *can’t-”*

“There are no more trains from Salzburg to Venice today,” Feliciano cut Gilbert off in one panicked breath.

Gilbert paused. “What?”

“There are no more trains from Salzburg to Venice today, I checked last night,” he said. “If he’d taken a plane, he would have been here by now, and... I don’t think he’d come after me anyway.”

“He could have drove.”

“He wouldn’t come after me,” Feliciano repeated, clenching his hand around the rosary as if he could still feel the sting of the slap. “Not now. Gil... if he’s started remembering, he could be distraught, he could be *anywhere,* and-”

“Shit.”

“I’m coming back.”

“Feliciano, we might find him long before you even arrive,” Gilbert argued. “Just stay there, we’ll call you if-”

“I don’t care,” Feliciano hung up, turning back to Francis with a desperate determination glowing in his eyes. “Francis...”

The Frenchman raised his hand to silence him, crossing over and taking his phone gently from Feliciano’s hand. “I will change our flight,” he said. “It is faster than the train would have been anyway.”

“You’re coming?”

“Of course,” Francis offered a smile. “Gilbert dragged me back into this mess, and now I must see it through to the end.”

Feliciano nodded resolutely, throwing his arms around Francis in a tight hug, before pulling away and dashing into the bedroom to get his coat.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas.

Austria, 1870's

Feliciano adored grand Balls like these. Really, he did. He loved the grandeur of it all, loved the excellent food and better wine, loved seeing everyone done up in their extravagant formal dress. Over centuries of his life, this one thing had never gotten old. Even in his earliest memories, he remembered running around the Roman palaces at parties with his brother, ignoring their grandfather's calls to behave. Feliciano had always been a social person, and grand gatherings of people never failed to excite him.

But there was only so much of talking about trade that he could take before he got hopelessly bored. Feliciano had stopped contributing to the conversation what felt like hours ago, allowing his brother to take the lead in bickering with Sadik over - Lord knew what, he hadn't been paying attention that much in the first place. Really, he couldn't be blamed for slipping away from the conversation and drifting off. Honestly, they didn't notice anyway.

The Ball was being held at Mirabell Palace in Salzburg, in the Marble Hall. Feliciano hadn't been back to Austria since his independence, and though it had only been about twenty years, he couldn't help but allow himself to get lost in nostalgia. The Marble Hall was a neoclassical marvel, it was so easy to wander around with his eyes tracing the details of the ceiling. However, it only followed that it was just as easy to walk blindly into someone. Which, of course, is exactly what he did.

Feliciano slammed into a solid wall of muscle, staggering back until he righted himself on his feet. "Ah! Sorry, so sorry, I wasn't paying attention," he stammered to apologise in fear of the wrath of whomever he'd walked into.

"Evidently."

The voice was deep and smooth as velvet. Feliciano finally looked up from his cowering to find himself standing in front of perhaps the most handsome man in Europe. Maybe in an odd way, after all he was hardly a conventional sort of handsome, but Feliciano found himself hopelessly attracted in an instant. The man was tall, broad shouldered, and blond, with blue eyes that seemed far too young for his stern features. He watched as the man's irritated expression gradually softened from his face, brows lifting slightly as they locked eyes. Feliciano was lost the moment he laid eyes on him. There was a spark of familiarity, like he'd

seen the man's face in a passing crowd, or a dream - but no, he was quite certain he'd never seen this man before.

Feliciano straightened up, brushing down the lapel and pins of his dress coat. Curiosity getting the better of him, as always, he tilted his head and took another sweeping look at the man. "I don't think I've seen you around before," he commented. "Who are you supposed to be?"

The man's frown returned. Not a scowl per say, but a concentrated look, like he was thinking over every syllable before the words left his mouth. "I am the German Empire. Pleasure to meet you," he said with a cordial bow.

Feliciano was so caught off guard with thrill that he forgot to return the gesture. "You're not serious! Gilbert's younger brother?" he beamed. "He finally let you out of your Ivory Tower, did he?"

Germany cocked his head, frown deepening in clear confusion. "I was not locked in a tower."

"Figuratively," Feliciano laughed. "I thought you'd be a lot smaller! Last I heard, you were frail and rather sickly."

"Yes, well," Germany cleared his throat, looking more than a little uncomfortable. "Now I am not."

"I'll say," Feliciano smiled. "Oh! I completely forgot. I'm-"

"The Northern half of the Republic of Italy, yes I know. I was informed of everyone here tonight."

Feliciano's smile slipped effortlessly into a flirtatious smirk. "Oh, were you? Sounds intimate. Tell me, do you know all my deep, dark secrets?"

Germany's eyes widened for a moment, slightly panicked in his confusion. "... No?"

Bursting into laughter, Feliciano shook his head. "You don't have to look so scared, I'm only teasing."

Germany, evidently, did not appreciate the laughter as his expense as much as Feliciano did. He shifted on his feet, fixing one of the gold cords on his coat. "I have to admit," he veered the subject. "I am rather surprised to see you and your brother here."

Feliciano tilted his head. "Why is that?"

Germany blinked. No doubt he believed the answer should be obvious, but Feliciano couldn't think of a good reason to miss a Ball like this. "You just fought a violent revolution against Austria not twenty years ago," he said.

Ah. That was it. Feliciano could only shrug. "Yes, against Austria, but not Roderich," he replied easily. "We may not always agree, but he is still a very dear friend of mine."

Germany couldn't seem to comprehend the simplicity of his response. "The Austrians decimated your armies," he pushed on. "Your people fought twice just to gain independence. How can you just forgive that?"

The question brought a gentle stop to Feliciano's indifference. From across the ballroom, he spotted Francis, standing not far from the ornate hearth, laughing as he spoke with Gilbert and Antonio. Feliciano smiled sadly to himself, before turning a wry glance up at the German. "I have forgiven much worse," he admitted. With a long sigh, his chipper attitude returned. "Besides, when you've lived as long as I have, you begin to separate yourself from war and politics. After a thousand years, you stop taking everything so dreadfully personal."

Germany turned his proud chin up, unconvinced. "I am not so sure that is possible. And even if it is, that does not mean it is right."

Feliciano's sardonic gaze bled into his smile. "Oh, you are *very* serious for such a young nation, aren't you? At least the North Americans know how to take a joke," he laughed, interrupting Germany before he could sputter his offense. "You'll learn. Now," Feliciano grabbed his hand, glancing around the room until he spotted a server carrying a silver tray of wine glasses by one of the large windows. He dragged Germany along behind him, letting go only to two glasses with a nod of thanks to the server. With a dazzling smile, he turned and offered a glass to the blond. "Try to relax. The Kaiser isn't going to send you to your room for misbehaving a bit."

Indignant at the comment, Germany nonetheless gave in and took the glass with a resigned sigh. Feliciano grinned, clinking their glasses together before taking a sip. Germany, however, waited until Feliciano had brought the glass away from his lips before even entertaining the idea of drinking.

Feliciano rolled his eyes. "Oh, for God's sake, it's not poisoned. I can think of better ways to ruin a party."

That was what it finally took to break him. Germany, as it turned out, had a bit of a dark sense of humour. He ducked his head and laughed, and the stern angles of his face softened to an almost boy-ish charm. Feliciano felt his breath high up in his chest, all lightheaded and ecstatic. Maybe it was just the wine, but that spark of undeniable familiarity was growing into a steady flame. He watched as Germany finally took a sip from his glass. Feliciano raised a brow. "Not so bad?"

"Not so bad," Germany repeated after savoring the wine on his tongue a moment.

Leaning back against the window, Feliciano took another slow sip of wine and admired the man before him. "You know, I'm really starting to like you," he cocked his head. "What's your name?"

And again returned that confused frown to the German's face. "I already told you," he replied slowly. "I am Germany."

Feliciano laughed. "No, I mean your *name* ," he said. Feliciano gestured down to himself. "See? Tonight, I am not Northern Italy. I am Feliciano Vargas."

Germany shook his head, clearly not getting the point. “Why does it matter?”

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” Feliciano quoted with a theatrical lilt to his tone. He waited a moment before giving in and laughing. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t have to. I’m just curious.”

Germany hesitated. Feliciano should have expected as much, he seemed incredibly stiff and formal. No doubt giving out something as familiar as his personal name to a man he just met was a difficult concept to grasp. However, with a resolute nod, he finally extended his hand. “Ludwig Beilschmidt.”

Feliciano had been reaching to shake his hand mere seconds before he said his name. Ludwig. Heart stopped cold in his chest, Feliciano froze, unresponsive when Ludwig closed the gap and shook his hand. The Ball heaved to a slow stop around them, the colour draining out until it was all left saturated and grey. *Ludwig.* The touch of his palm against Feliciano’s own raced like lightning and fire up his arm and into his seized lungs, where that flame of recognition had already burst into an inferno. *Ludwig* . Feliciano’s mind kept screaming that it was nothing, that he was probably just a namesake, but all it took was that touch and he *knew* .

A hand clapped onto his shoulder brought the world screeching back to him with enough momentum to make him nauseous. Feliciano just barely stifled a gasp, letting go of Ludwig’s hand to turn around and face the newcomer.

“Feliciano!” Gilbert grinned. Feliciano instantly recognized it as force, tension straining in the Prussian’s jaw as he put up the casual front. “You’re looking a little pale. Too much to drink?” he laughed, already steering Feliciano away. “Don’t mind him, Ludwig, I’ll make sure he’s passed off to his brother and taken care of.”

Feliciano didn’t have the time to argue. He didn’t have the mind to. Still in a state of shock, all he could manage was one last look over his shoulder at Ludwig before he was ushered out of the ballroom.

The moment they were in the hall, Gilbert’s front dropped. He stepped faster, guiding Feliciano along with him at a rate that nearly sent the Italian tripping just to keep up. He quickly pulled him around a corner, into a small, isolated corridor. An enormous window at the end was the only source of light, pouring blue moonlight onto the floor and walls. Roderich, Erzsébet, and somewhat more surprisingly, Francis, were already there waiting. Gilbert turned, holding Feliciano by both shoulders, his gaze all at once severe and sympathetic.

“Feliciano-”

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Feliciano gasped.

Gilbert cringed, looking away before finding his resolve to look Feliciano in the eyes again. “I’ll explain everything.”

Erzsébet pushed off the wall she'd been leaning against, the furthest from Roderich, and brushed her skirts aside as she marched up to the Prussian. "Gilbert, what the hell-"

"I said I'll explain everything," Gilbert repeated in a harsh whisper. He nodded his head toward the end of the hall, where Bavaria and Baden were walking by unaware. They all remained silent until they'd passed. "But not here. Meet me at the old Sankt Bacchus Cathedral tomorrow evening."

Erzsébet huffed impatiently. "I'm due back in Budapest tomorrow."

"Reschedule," Gilbert snapped. "Now, let's move before anyone gets suspicious. But before we go, let me make one thing clear," Gilbert turned toward Francis, eyes steely and tongue flint as he spoke with a voice like flames between his teeth. "You are only here because you overheard me talking to Roderich. If you tell a soul, or do *anything* against-"

"My friend," Francis raised his hands in a show of surrender, "let me assure you, I've more than learned from my past mistakes. No matter what may come of the future, I will never cross that line again."

Gilbert held out for a moment, staring down his friend before finally relenting.

The remainder of the night was a whirlwind. To be entirely honest, Feliciano couldn't remember most of it, and it was not because of the wine. He was quiet, walking about in a daze, catching spare glances of Ludwig through the crowd. He kept his distance, knowing that he would be unable to control himself from breaking down should Ludwig say such much as a word to him. That night, he was a mess. Positively shaking with nerves, he didn't sleep, and could barely eat throughout the next day. By the time the next evening did come around, he was just hardly keeping it together. Riding up the mountain trails on a loaned horse, he barely gave the beast time to stop before he jumped off at the foot of the Cathedral. Gilbert, Roderich, Erzsébet, and Francis were already waiting in the decrepit remains of the town square. Feliciano scrambled over to them, breath fogging at his lips in the bitter cold.

"Alright," Gilbert began, turning his head up toward the Cathedral. "Let's g-" he stopped abruptly at the sound of galloping hooves echoing off the stone ruins. Instantly on alert, he watched for the intruders coming around the bend in the path beneath the old gate. When he saw Lovino and Antonio come riding toward them, he dropped his guard and looked down at the Italian with a scowl. *"Feliciano* ."

Feliciano cowered back. "I was a wreck when I got back to the inn last night!" he defended himself. "I had to explain to Lovino!"

Gilbert raised his brow. "And Antonio?"

"Lovino told me," the Spaniard shrugged as he pulled the reigns of his horse to guide it into a stop. Lovino promptly kicked him in the thigh from his own horse.

Gilbert groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. Clearly, he did not agree with that excuse, but there was no use arguing it now. "Alright," he shook his head as Lovino and Antonio dismounted. "But this is already more people than I had planned knowing. No one breathes a

word of this, do you understand me? Not a word to a single living soul - in fact, not even a dead one."

Lovino rolled his eyes as he took his place beside his brother. "Yes, yes, we understand well enough. Get on with it."

They made the trek up the hill. The cobblestone, though warn down and rough from bombing, was slippery with ice. Feliciano nearly fell backwards halfway up, and would have had it not been for Antonio catching him. The Spaniard flashed him a sympathetic smile as he helped to right him, but Feliciano could practically see the pity buried beneath it. They continued on against the harsh wind, breaching the top of the escarpment and entering the Cathedral. The moment the door closed behind them, the silence was profound. Though the wind continued to howl outside, it was only a whisper that drifted away and died in the overwhelming size of the Cathedral.

Gilbert stopped only to turn on his pocket lantern, prompting Erzsébet and Francis to do the same with theirs, before nodding toward the sanctuary. "This way," he said.

Feliciano had the sinking suspicion of where they were going, but didn't want to believe it until they veered to the right of the altar, heading along past the devotionals and into a door behind the side chapel. There, Gilbert pushed open a heavy oak door, the screech of its hinged echoing off the vaulted ceiling. One by one they all trickled down a dark, narrow stairwell while Feliciano remained frozen at the top. It was only when he felt Lovino's hand, steady on his back, that he finally moved. Numb to the core and shivering with it, Feliciano entered the crypt below the Cathedral.

By the time he got to the bottom, he was shaking. The air was thick down there, clouded with dust that hadn't been disturbed in centuries. Roderich coughed horribly ahead of them. Their shadows made haunting beams in the light of the pocket lamps, shifting on the walls and forgotten tombs. Feliciano knew where they were headed. The only thing keeping him moving forward was his brother's hand on his back. He could barely see Lovino's face in the darkness, but there was just enough light bouncing off the stone from the lamps ahead of them to see the grim scowl on his face. Lovino caught his eye. He didn't say anything, didn't smile, but his scowl softened as he gave him a nod. He understood. He was there for him.

They rounded a bend in the crypt that opened up into a larger room. There was simple decoration on the wall, wrought iron ivy and dead-eyed angels looking over a single stone casket on a pedestal in the centre. Gilbert hung his lantern up on a piece of iron, pointing it in at the casket like some unholy beacon. Exchanging a glance, Erzsébet and Francis did the same. The room was entirely silent as the seven of them stood in the crypt. Finally, Gilbert approached the casket and placed his hands firmly upon the lid. "Move it," he ordered.

Feliciano felt his throat go dry. "Gilbert, don't-"

"Trust me," Gilbert cut him off. He looked to Antonio and Francis, nodding toward the heavy stone lid for help. After a moment's deliberation, after all this was technically desecrating a grave, the two nations stood on either side of Gilbert and began to help him push. The stone gave an ungodly screech as it ground together.

Feliciano whimpered and turned his back on the scene, hands over his mouth. He was going to be sick. If he had to look at the decayed body, he was going to be sick, he was going to pass out, he couldn't breathe -

Lovino's hands braced his shoulders. The elder Italian turned over his shoulder, positively snapping his teeth at the others. "That's enough!" he snarled.

Gilbert refused to let up. "Just trust me!" he shouted back as, with a final push, the three of them managed to shove the lid off the casket.

It slid to the floor with a thunder loud enough to wake the dead, and for one heart-stopping moment, Feliciano thought it might. He clenched his eyes shut, breath coming short and tight in his burning chest. The silence of the room behind him didn't register. His own heart beat was an ocean roar in his ears.

"Feliciano..." Lovino breathed. Looking down and noticing his brother's turmoil, he stepped in front of him and ducked down so that he could see Feliciano's face where the younger was hunched over. "Feliciano, *look.* "

Feliciano could not look. He could not move, couldn't tear his hands from over his mouth, could not open his eyes, could not breathe through that wraithlike panic screaming in his ears. It was only when Lovino gently moved his hands form over his face so that he could hold his chin and tilt it up, fixing him with a fortifying gaze, that the panic cleared enough for him to come to his senses somewhat. The crypt around him was entirely silent. Feliciano's gaze drifted from his brother and to the others, each one frozen in a state of awe except for Gilbert. The Prussian looked down at the open casket with a low brow – he'd known what he was going to see, and yet it didn't seem to make the sight any easier to stomach. With one more look at his brother, Feliciano turned, and stepped toward the casket, legs trembling.

He looked inside. All at once, the room turned cold. Like the air had been sucked out, Feliciano found himself lightheaded, stumbling back into Antonio, who steadied him with a hand on his shoulder. Feliciano never took his eyes off the casket, until the glow of the lamp flickered over Gilbert's face as he stepped toward him.

"How?" Feliciano breathed.

"I do not know," Gilbert answered truthfully. "I came to find the grave like this not long after Ludwig first appeared. I had to be sure… but to be entirely honest, I am left with more questions than answers."

Feliciano shook his head, tearful gaze drifting back to the casket. "But where is-"

Gilbert never let him finish. He pulled back the lapel of his overcoat, reaching into an inner pocket and pulling out a golden rosary laid in with rubies. Feliciano choked on a dry gasp, hands flying up to his chest like he could hold his heart down from fleeing the Cathedral. Gilbert held it out for him to see. "I found Ludwig with this the day he washed up on the banks of the Rhine. He had nothing, no clothes, no idea who he was, but he knew his name, and he had this."

Feliciano reached out, fingertips whispering over the fine rosary. He withdrew his hand like he'd been scorched the moment he touched it. Gilbert pocketed it again.

"But why would he appear with the rosary he was laid to rest with?" Roderich questioned once he'd found his voice again. "Of all things, why that?"

"He was rather fond of it," Gilbert replied with a shrug. "It had been on his person when he died, that was really the only reason we'd kept it with the body."

"Some act of God, maybe?" Francis suggested quietly, as if the divine itself could overhear him in the crypt of that sacred place. "With him returning, it could be a sign."

A hush fell over the room, the implications of this - whether it was a miracle or not - weighing heavily on the mind of every Nation gathered. Feliciano stayed silent about the rosary. That Ludwig was fond of it because of their connection did not seem relevant in the grand scheme of things, and - it was rather personal. He doubted he could speak in that moment even if he could find a way to articulate himself.

Antonio was the one to finally break the pregnant pause that had followed. "What does this mean?"

After straightening his coat out, Gilbert walked slowly, deliberately, to the centre of the room. The casket sat between him and the other nations, and in the glow of the pocket lanterns, his silhouette projected onto the curved walls like some unholy ghost. "It is him. So far as I have been able to discern, it *is* him.... but at the same time," he gestured down to the evidence lying in the casket for them all to see, "he is not who he used to be. He is Germany, and that is all he knows. If he has come back with no memory of his past life... I believe it must be for some reason. No one knows quite what we are, or why we exist, but what we do know is that we exist off the collective memories of our people, what memories we have lived through." Gilbert paused there, frowning down at the casket as he searched for the words he needed.

"If Ludwig were to remember who he was, he could become Holy Rome once again... but Holy Rome is no more, and any other Germanic nation could take his place. They could kill him, and even if they did not, who knows what would happen to him should his identity change?"

"It is not a chance we can afford to take..." Erzsébet trailed off, still quiet in her shock.

"No," Gilbert affirmed. His gaze drifted over every Nation in the crypt. "Ludwig is never to know."

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Austria, Present Day.

The owner of the stall turned the rosary over in her palm with a delicate touching, adjusting the glasses perched on her nose to get a better view of the intricate details. Ludwig watched her, schooling his expression to mask his anxious heart. Hands tucked casually into the pockets of his grey coat, he breathed in evenly through his noise and out again. His entire chest was a furnace, a slow building head smoldering in the pit of his gut and painting the walls of his torso with acrid smoke. It was a wonder he could breathe at all. The moment he'd read the inscription on the back of the rosary, he'd been unable to quell this roaring anxiousness for answers.

The stall keeper glanced up at him again. "Where on earth did you find this?" she asked.

Ludwig, ever calm and collected, replied evenly. "It is a family heirloom I'd found a few months ago. My mother was Austrian. I've only just recognized the inscription on the back at the old Cathedral on the mountain."

"This is quite the treasure, young man," the woman said as she passed the rosary back to him. "That rosary is *very* old - how old exactly I cannot tell, but it would be worth a hefty sum now."

"I am not interested in selling it," Ludwig replied as the beads of the rosary coiled in the centre of his palm. He closed his fingers tenderly around it. "I was just hoping you could tell me a little more about what it is... where it came from?"

The woman had begun to turn away as he was speaking, reaching up to fix a wayward tree on the summit of his miniature display. "A rosary is a rosary," she shrugged as she continued working. "Without more information to go on, I am afraid I cannot tell you anything you do not already know," she paused at her own words, seeming to consider them again as she withdrew her hand from the display. Her gaze settled on the small form of the Cathedral for a moment. "Although..." she trailed off as she turned back toward Ludwig. "There is a story that I've read about a pair of rosaries going missing from the Cathedral. It was around the 17th century. The Arch Bishop had commissioned two rosaries to be made for the marriage of a Countess. They were stolen from the Cathedral not long before the wedding, and were never found again. Who knows, perhaps your ancestor was the thief, or knew them," she shook her head. "In any case, that's just an old history. I read it in the archives of Sankt Sergius," she gestured up to the tower of the church behind them. "If you are to find out more about that rosary, I should think it'd be best to start there."

"I see..." Ludwig trailed off, before taking another look down at the rosary in his hand. "The text didn't happen to mention what they looked like, did it?"

The stall keeper paused, trying to recall the description from memory. "One looked just like yours, I believe. Rosewood beads and a golden crucifix embedded with emeralds. The other was the same, only with rubies instead."

Ludwig exhaled. Back rigid, he tucked the rosary gently into his pocket and nodded his thanks to the stall keeper. It wasn't much, but it was something to go on, a lead to follow. He hadn't been able to shake this feeling dread and confusion since he'd realized that the rosary he'd taken from Feliciano at the train station was not, in fact, his. Too many questions had been left unanswered, and with Feliciano's abrupt departure still stinging, he was only left

with more. Ludwig made his way up to Sankt Sergius, climbing the wide stone steps to the grand, arch doors. The town was lively at this violet hour, everyone soaking in Christmas Eve under the lights and garlands, warm on mulled wine and good company. He was certain that his brother, Roderich, and Erzsébet were down here somewhere enjoying themselves - maybe he would join them later. Solitary as he was feeling at the moment, it may go his spirits some good. For now, however, he could not rest until he'd put down these curiosities.

Ludwig wrapped his hand around the brass bar on the door and prepared to pull.

"You will not find answers in there."

The words stopped Ludwig cold. He frowned, looking over his shoulder to find Konrad Braun standing at the base of the stairs. The man looked haggard, dark circles hollowing out his eyes, thinning hair a mess - but even all that considered, there was an overwhelming power to him as he stared back at Ludwig through a narrow gaze. Ludwig let go of the door, turning to face him. "What do you mean?" he questioned. "How do you-"

"You want to know who you are," Konrad interrupted.

It was an odd thing to notice, perhaps because of the contrast of the surrounding snow, but Ludwig did catch the black stains coating the fingers of his left hand - charcoal dark and dry enough to crack along the joints of his fingers. Ludwig shook his head. "I was just looking into this rosary, I-"

The elder laughed bitterly, the sound more like acid spit onto the stone than any sort of amusement. "That rosary is nothing. A distraction. Your questions aren't about the object and what it means, or even why you had it in the first place. They are about why no one will *tell* you."

Ludwig straightened up. There was something... almost unhinged about the old nation, something a little unsteady and manic, but... he was right. Eerily so. "What exactly are you getting at?"

Konrad turned briskly. "Come with me," he replied. "I have the answers you are looking for."

The words sent a chill through the core of Ludwig's bones. Konrad began to walk away, without waiting to see if Ludwig would follow. For one moment, Ludwig hesitated, looking back at the church towering above him, before he trailed after the old nation. Konrad led him away from the church, and the Christmas Market, away from the centre of the town. Ludwig watched as they passed where he'd parked his own car beside the canal, gathering layers of snow. Konrad eventually stopped at his own car, further toward the outskirts of town. He got into the driver's seat, once again not waiting for Ludwig before starting the engine. Ludwig slipped into the passenger side, the car dark and cold. Konrad guided the car onto the road toward the mountain.

"Where are you taking me?" Ludwig questioned once they had cleared the edge of the town.

Konrad grunted under his breath. "You know where."

Ludwig's gaze drifted up toward the mountain peak, picking out the spires of the Cathedral and the walls of the ancient village. He slipped his hand into his pocket, feeling the weight of the rosary there. "What you said..." Ludwig murmured, continuing when Konrad gave him a sharp glance from the corner of his eye. "You said 'I have the answers you are looking for'. Ernst had given me a note with the same words the night he disappeared."

Konrad's hands tightened on the steering wheel until his boney fingers lost their colour. He said nothing, but in the faint light of the car, Ludwig swore he could see a corporeal darkness pass over his face.

The remainder of the trip up the mountain was silent. No radio, no words, hardly even the howl of the wind outside passed through the car. Konrad drove up the mountain road toward the estate, so far that Ludwig had been convinced he was taking him back to Roderich's home, until his car veered off the road. Ludwig's hand shot out to hold the door, bracing himself as Konrad drove onto an unpaved road, thick with snow and entirely desolate. Finally, he stopped when the path began to narrow too close to continue, and they could no longer see the main road. Konrad parked the car, twisting the key and yanking it out of the ignition once he'd put it in park. He looked to Ludwig. "Get out."

Now, Ludwig was a smart man. Analytical, calculating, everything his brother had taught him to be. He was, at that point, starting to get the feeling that following Konrad was not the safest choice - however, overpowering that was the nothing that he did not have a choice at all. Ludwig opened the door and slipped out. Leaving the car abandoned on the path, Konrad wordlessly continued up the narrowing path. Ludwig, as ever, followed.

In the approaching darkness, it was no great wonder that Ludwig did not recognize the path as the same he'd taken with Feliciano just a day ago at first. The sun had already dropped below the horizon, and the moon was not yet at its zenith. Light was scarce, but as they approached a fork in the path that lead up toward the stone steps of the lookout, it clicked. Konrad did not pause even a moment to look at the beauty of the valley, bathed in the waning winter light. He turned and continued on toward the cobblestone path leading up to the village. Ludwig lingered behind only a moment, soaking in the atmospheric light while it lasted, before moving on once again.

Halfway up the plateau, Konrad did finally stop. Ludwig had been walking several steps behind him the entire time, and had hoped at first that the elder nation would finally tell him what was going on. It was only when he stepped closer that he noticed the man was gleaning with sweat, panting from the effort of the hike. Ludwig reached out to his shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked, pressing on when he received no answer. "Do you need-"

Konrad pushed Ludwig's hand off his shoulder with a snarl. "I do not need your help," he hissed. Pride was the only thing keeping the aging man going at that point, that much was clear. Still, it was enough.

They made it up the mountain. They passed under the ancient gate, the fortified walls, through the ghostly streets of the village all to reach the throne of the Cathedral, perched on the ridge just above the city. Konrad stopped at the door, gesturing with a sharp movement for Ludwig to open the doors. Though hesitant, Ludwig obeyed silently, shoving the doors open with a grunt. The screech of the hinges echoed up through the vaulted ceiling like some

ungodly howl. Ludwig stopped in the doorway, a pang of hurt shooting through his chest as he recalled his time here with Feliciano. He stuck his hands in his pockets, more to fight off the bone-deep chill than anything.

His fingers grazed the rosary. In that moment, a sensation like breathing underwater overtook him, as the fleeting image of two young boys sitting huddled beneath the sanctuary surrounded by a pool of light, flickered as real as anything. The image was gone just as fast, but it felt Ludwig breathless, blinking.

Konrad shouldered passed him. “This way,” he grunted as he walked without care or reverence down the center of the nave.

He led him down a stairwell hidden behind the altar. ‘I dreamed my lady came and found me dead’ echoed endlessly in Ludwig’s mind, a haunting echo as they descended into the decrepit halls beneath the Cathedral. Konrad, prepared for the darkness, took out a flashlight from his pocket. The light was harsh, the beam of light well defined in the dusty air and the shadows sharp along the walls. “What is this place?” Ludwig asked.

Konrad did not answer his question, he walked ahead, taking the light with him, beckoning Ludwig to follow. “You have memories you’re told are dreams,” he said, tone low and gruff as he navigated the ancient halls. “You have been to places you swear you have seen before.”

Ludwig’s chest tightened, his brow dropped low, his jaw set. “What is this place, Konrad?” he repeated.

Again, the man did not respond directly. The low ceilinged hall opened up into a wider space, where a stone casket sat in the centre upon a carved pedestal. “Every time you try to get answers, you are shut down, redirected-”

“Answer me, Konrad!” Ludwig roared. His voice bounced off the curved walls, down the corridors and into the unblemished darkness beyond.

However, even in the fact of the larger, stronger man’s fury, Konrad remained eerily cold. “These images you so desperately grasp at are of a lifetime centuries before you were born,” he seethed. “Am I wrong?”

Ludwig breathed out harshly through his nose, squaring off on the other side of the casket. “You are not.”

Konrad laughed. Of all things, he laughed, but the down was hollow and humourless. “You want answers?” he pointed down at the casket. “Everything you seek is in there.”

Ludwig took a step back. “I am not defiling a grave just to satisfy my curiosity,” he growled. “If you have no intention to tell me what is going on, then-”

Konrad reached into the pocket of his own coat, pulling out a pristine cleaned flintlock pistol - the only stains were those which Konrad’s gunpowder-dirty fingers left behind on the ivory as he gripped the hilt. He pointed it at Ludwig, his hand never wavering. “Open it,” he commanded.

Ludwig had two options in that moment. Fight Konrad for the gun and make his escape, or.... the answers were there in front of him. Everything that had been plaguing him for years, that burning desire to understand who and what he was, sitting inside that casket. Ludwig braced his hands on the stone lid, looking up at Konrad with a defiant glare, before using all his strength to push it off. It did not budge at first, but when it did, it slid halfway off, perched at an angle. Ludwig coughed through the cloud of dust burning his lungs. When the grey cloud cleared, he peered inside.

The boy had his face. Lying in the casket, pale as death yet frozen as if he'd died not an hour ago, was a boy with Ludwig's face. Ludwig stumbled back, unable to breathe as his gaze drifted down to the dated etched into the casket pedestal - 1648. The body was incorruptible, preserved by some otherworldly force without decay, fresh as the day he'd died. Ludwig's blood roared in his ears, a hellfire eating up his heart and spreading like a frozen inferno through his trembling body. *The boy had his face* .

Konrad stared down at the body, his face slowly twisting into unadulterated rage. "So, it is true," he spat.

Ludwig's breath came too fast. "I... I don't-" he gasped. "I don't understand."

"Look!" Konrad roared, gesturing wildly down at the boy. "You know who that is! Who *you* are!"

Ludwig shook his head. The world itself was tilting off its axis, closing in around the edges in dark whispers, and still he could not tear his gaze from the stone casket. The immaculate body had his arms crossed over his chest, hands closed over his heart, empty - that wasn't right. Ludwig ripped the rosary out of his pocket - still not right, still not perfect, but it was enough. The ruby rosary, sitting forgotten in a box with his name on it, was supposed to be clasped in that boy's hands. In his hands.

Ludwig stood in the crypt and stared down at his own corpse. The name fell in a breath of his tongue. "The Holy Roman Empire..."

His head split in two. Some Seraphim's holy blade pierced straight through his skull for all it felt like. Ludwig howled in agony, gripping at his head as he staggered back, rosary still tangled around his fingers. He was half aware of Konrad shouting at him, unleashing pent up fury, but he couldn't hear it. It was all in his head, just in his head, but the world was in a free fall through the black pit of the empty void, and the ground was shaking, cracking beneath his feet. A thousand years of memories he could not pause to see flooded into his head with the strength of a comet.

The boy in the casket began to disintegrate. Crumbling to dust in an invisible wind, the corpse of Holy Rome disappeared like every deceased nation had done before him. It was all Ludwig saw before the darkness caught up with him.

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Feliciano hadn't realized he was picking frays into the edges of his sweater until Francis placed his hand over his. Gaze snapping from the window and the sharp snow capped peaks of the mountains overhead, he looked back into the cab to find Francis giving him a gentle look, prying Feli's fingers away from the knit peeking out from underneath his coat. Feliciano looked down to find the tattered edge of his sweater, the loose threads dangling over his thigh.

It didn't need to be said, the fact that Feliciano was a nervous wreck. He had been since the moment they left his apartment in Venice, impatiently tugging Francis over the canals and toward the ferry to the mainland. He'd been awake for hours at that point, and it showed in the dark hue of his hooded eyes, the pallor of his skin, even the jitter of his chest as he breathed. Feliciano was exhausted, mentally, physically, and emotionally drained - but there was no calming down, and Francis did not tell him to. He would not be able to relax or rest until he knew that Ludwig was safe.

Feliciano let go of the edge of his sweater and hugged his arms close to himself. They were approaching the village of Sankt Sergius, the signs for the little town directing their cab off the main road and into the basin of the valley. From there, they would pass through on their way up the mountain toward Roderich's home. Now that they were so close, Feliciano was practically trembling. He worried at his bottom lip with his teeth, biting hard enough to make them flushed. Feliciano pressed his forehead against the cool glass and closed his eyes. It was all he could do not to think about the last time he'd been in a car driving toward the town, with Ludwig because everything had fallen apart so horribly.

"I am *sure* everything will be fine, Feliciano," Francis spoke quietly to him, hardly loud enough to draw the driver's attention.

Feliciano exhaled through his nose, shifting off the window when he couldn't take the biting cold of the glass any longer. "I know," he replied. "I just need to know that he's safe. Then we can continue on to Paris."

Francis frowned, resting his hand lightly on Feliciano's shoulder. "You won't want to stay for Christmas?"

For a long moment, Feliciano did not respond. He simply stared ahead out the window, catching a bare glimpse of a spire of Sankt Bacchus. A cold, doomed feeling lurched in his gut. "Ludwig won't want me there," he murmured, tearing his gaze down to his lap. "Not after everything I've done…"

As much as Francis appeared he might like to argue that point, he knew when not to push. In any case, he did not have the chance to. As the car pulled off the main road and into the town, passing through the narrow streets to get toward the mountain path, Francis' eyes drifted out toward village square. "Is that…" he trailed off.

Feliciano's attention snapped to his side of the car. He practically crawled over Francis' lap just to get a better look. Sure enough, Gilbert, Erzsébet, and Roderich were all congregating

in the middle of the town square, in the shadow of Sankt Sergius. “That’s them,” Feliciano rushed. “Stop the car!”

Startled into obeying, the cab driver slammed on the breaks, much to the disapproval of the car behind them. They skidded on the icy road, but thankfully avoided being rear-ended - though they did receive a few loud honks and a good deal of shouting from the other driver. Feliciano didn’t pay it any mind. Before the car had come to a complete stop, he’d already thrown off his seatbelt and scrambled out onto the street, nearly slipping in a patch of ice. Leaving Francis behind to deal with the cab driver, he sprinted out toward the trio.

The village was virtually deserted at that point, with small groups of people here and there on their way warmer dwellings. It seemed that everyone was either at home or at Christmas Eve mass inside Sankt Sergius. Golden light from the mass inside pooled out onto the snow and the cobblestone, with the faint voices of the choir singing ancient carols inside echoing out into the empty square.

Gilbert, Erzsébet, and Roderich were all huddled in a circle speaking urgently (or arguing, it was difficult to tell) when Feli skidded to a stop, nearly barreling straight into Roderich’s back. Whatever conversation they’d been having broke up immediately upon the Italian’s arrival, but he didn’t care. He didn’t stop to listen to it. “Have you found him yet?” he panted.

Gilbert’s expression snapped from shocked to borderline furious in an instant. He shifted his stance to look down at Feliciano, glower sharp and brows low. “What are you doing here, Feli?”

Feliciano ignored his question, looking instead to Roderich and Erzsébet. “Have you found him?”

“No, not yet,” Erzsébet shook her head. “But we did find his car parked by the canal. It’s covered in snow, so it hasn’t moved in at least a few hours. He has to be in the village somewhere.”

Gilbert, however, was not so willing to let go. “I told you not to come,” he said to Feliciano through clenched teeth.

Feliciano shook his head, standing upright once he’d caught his breath. “I wasn’t going to stay in Venice when I knew Ludwig was missing, Gilbert,” he said. “What did you expect me to do?”

“I would *expect* that you’d stay out of the way,” Gilbert snapped. The venom in his voice alone was enough to make Feliciano stagger back a step. “You’ve done enough.”

Slipping his wallet back into his coat pocket as he approached, Francis gave once last wave of apology to their cab driver and set both his and Feliciano’s small suitcases down. He raised his hands, stepping in to try to dissipate the growing tension. “Gilbert, my friend, I understand that you are frustrated but there is no need to take it out on Feliciano. He is only trying to make things right.”

Without losing any anger, Gilbert's sharp glare shot up to the Frenchman. "Francis, you are *the last* person I want to see right now. Stay out of it."

"No," Roderich countered. "Francis is right. None of this is going to help us find Ludwig."

Gilbert practically snarled at that comment. "We wouldn't be *in* this mess if you hadn't invited *him* !" he shouted, pointing wildly at Feliciano.

Roderich's eyes narrowed. In the face of Gilbert's hot fury, he was cold in his quiet, protective anger. "Feliciano has *always* been welcome in my home, Christmas or not. That did not change this year, and it has not in the past. You have never protested it, and you're only taking issue now because of what's happened."

Gilbert scoffed. "And Konrad?"

"The same invitation has always been extended to him and the Old Kingdoms before they passed!" Roderich hissed. "How was I supposed to know he would come this year? He hasn't come in *years* , Gilbert."

"So, it's just fine with you, then!" Gilbert threw his hands in the air. "Just fine with you to put Ludwig in jeopardy like this just because *you* wanted to pretend we're all a big, happy family with you picturesque, postcard *fucking* Christmas party."

Roderich took one dangerous step toward Gilbert. "Just because my blood is not the same does *not* make me any less one of you. I will *not* apologise for trying to make peace with the Old Kingdoms, Gilbert."

"Evidence to the contrary being the entirety of European History!" Gilbert snarled, taking that stride one step further. They were in each others' faces at this point, a discordant shouting match over-top the angelic melodies within the church and the snow falling heavily around them. Gilbert pushed at Roderich's chest. "What, you think it's going to make a difference now? You think a little get together over gluhwien once a year is going to absolve *any* of us of what we've done?!"

"Alright!" Erzsébet growled, shoving herself in between Gilbert and Roderich and forcing them apart at arm's length. "That's *enough* , both of you."

Gilbert pushed Erzsé's hand off his chest. "No, it's clearly not! I'm the only one here who's thinking about Ludwig, and I-"

"Stop it!"

The thundering shout from Feliciano shocked everyone present into total silence. In one, unexpected outburst, he'd drawn all attention to himself. Feliciano stood with a quivering lip, eyes wet and red, just barely keeping it together. He had his hands clenched at his sides, trembling through his mittens - nonetheless, he stood his ground. That, alone, was enough to command silence. Feliciano walked slowly, deliberately, right up to Gilbert, staring up at him on the verge of frustrated tears. Gilbert, for his part, did not move. He stared back down at Feliciano head on, but the fury had been replaced with quiet awe.

Feliciano took in a deep, fortifying breath before speaking. “You are *not* the only one here who’s thinking about Ludwig,” he began. “You are not the only person who cares about him and don’t you *dare* try to say otherwise. Gilbert, I know how much you love your brother, but you *have* to see it! You have been so desperate to protect him that you were willing to make him miserable in the process!”

Struggling to recover, Gilbert blinked and shook his head, stubbornly clinging to his conviction even as Feliciano chipped away at it. “I’ve told you, Feliciano. Better broken hearted, better *miserable* than dead. If that makes me the bad guy here, so be it.”

“But look at where that’s gotten us, Gilbert!” Feliciano’s tone was pleading now, begging Gilbert to understand. “That’s what you don’t understand! For centuries now, your *obsession* has been keeping him safe, and… and I *know* that, but you’ve been so blinded by trying to control everyone around him that you’ve forgotten entirely about *him* .”

Gilbert, for one of the few times in his life, was on the edge of speechlessness. “I don’t…”

Feliciano shook his head, cutting Gilbert off before he could stammer out an argument. “You can’t expect him to live in the dark forever. Don’t you understand? *He* is the one that sought me out. *He* is the one that was drawn up to the Cathedral. *He* is the one who started asking questions, who wanted to know more about his past! Gilbert…” he trailed off, voice hitching as he tried his hardest to keep from crying, “have you ever, even *once* , considered that keeping him in the dark was putting him at risk more than anything else?”

And it was all at once clear, in the rush of Gilbert’s lungs emptying and the way his shoulders dropped… that he hadn’t.

Feliciano sniffed, rubbing at his teary eyes with his sleeve before straightening up again. “You did your best, I understand that, Gilbert, I really do, and I know that I’m not free of guilt in all of this… But I’m just-” Feliciano choked on a sob, “I’m so sick and tired of breaking his heart. I love him… *so much* , and I *know* that he loves me. And… and I understand now that the more anyone tries to get in the way of that… the worse this all becomes. That’s what this has always been about! I’m not the only one at fault here. *You* have let your fear of the unknown overtake everything just because *you* need to feel like you’re in control!” Feliciano’s voice was borderline hysterical by the end, as he pointed an accusing finger at Gilbert. In the aftermath, still, everyone was quiet. Feli was left worked up and out of breath, the tears finally pouring down his face.

Gilbert stood there for a long moment, before hissing under his breath and turning on his heel, stomping a few paces away with his back to the group. Feliciano’s conflict began to slip, panic setting in that he’d gone too far. He watched as Gilbert roughly pushed his hand back through his hair, his shoulders shaking.

Feliciano stumbled forward, tentatively reaching out his hand toward Gilbert’s back as he approached. “I… Gilbert, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

Gilbert spun around and pulled Feliciano into his arms before he could finish. With the wind knocked out of him by the force of the embrace, it took Feliciano a moment or two to

recover, but the moment he did, he was throwing his arms around Gilbert and burying his face against his shoulder.

“No, Feli,” Gilbert said, voice thick and muffled by the Italian’s coat. “ *I’m* sorry. You’re right - about everything,” he pulled back, holding Feliciano by the shoulders still as he looked down at him. “I’m sorry.”

Feliciano swallowed hard, eyes stinging with tears again. “I’m sorry too, Gilbert…” he murmured, before shaking his head. “But none of that matters right now, we have to find Ludwig.”

Gilbert nodded, pursing his lips as he looked toward the canal and Ludwig’s abandoned car. “Go back up to the house, Feli.” Panicked for a moment that he was being pushed aside again, Feliciano opened his mouth to argue, but Gilbert was quick to explain. “His car is still here, Feli. He’s still down here somewhere. For all we know, it just stalled from the cold and he hasn’t been able to get back. Someone should be there in case he got a cab or… something, I don’t know. We’ll keep looking for him down here just in case. Hell, he could already be up there.”

Feliciano’s gaze flickered toward Francis before dropping down to the snow at his feet. “He won’t want to see me, Gil…”

Gilbert’s response did not hesitate one moment. “Yes he will.”

He could only close his eyes at that, exhaling slowly into the cold air. Feli nodded as he looked up toward the mountain summit. “Is Konrad…”

“No,” Roderich spoke up, seemling recovered from the shock of watching Feliciano stand up to Gilbert. “He left hours before Ludwig went missing.”

Feli did not try to hide his relief at that. With Francis stretching out his hand for him to take, Feliciano took it. However reluctantly, the two of them headed back up the mountain to Roderich’s Estate.

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Needless to say, Feliciano did not find waiting up in the warmth and safety of the house an easy task. Any little hope Feli had that Ludwig might have already gone back was diminished as soon as their cab rounded through the gates and down the drive to reveal a dark and empty building. Francis, to his credit, did his best to get Feliciano to relax, to ease his worries, but there was little to be done aside from turning the lights on and starting a hearthfire in the parlour.

Feliciano immediately took to pacing the room, obsessively checking his phone every other minute as he waited for an update from the others down in the valley - nothing. Not even a

word. Feliciano reasoned with himself that there was simply nothing to update, and it certainly would not help his headspace to receive reports of them coming up empty in their search, but not knowing was slowly going to drive Feliciano insane, he was sure of it.

“Feliciano,” Francis sighed for the nth time from the chaise. “ *Cher* , please, sit down.” When Feliciano did not listen, Francis reached out to take his hand as he passed him, forcing Feliciano to pause and hear him. “Worrying is not going to help anything right now.”

Feliciano tugged his hand free of Francis’ hold and continued pacing. “I can’t help it. I *am* worried. I can’t just *not* be worried.”

Francis leaned back in his seat. “At this rate, you are going to wear a hole in the floor. I don’t think Roderich would take too kindly to that.”

“Well, he needs them redone anyway.”

“Didn’t he just get the floors refinished?” Francis raised a brow.

“Fifty years ago.”

“You see, they’re still brand new.”

Feliciano was nearly upset with himself for how difficult it was not to laugh. He supposed that if he did have to be stuck up in the house waiting to hear from Ludwig, Francis was the person to be stuck with - however ironic that may be. He had a way of making any dire situation just a little better with quick wit and overwhelming sympathy. Feliciano hid his laugh with a sigh, rubbing both hands down his face as he looked out the window and toward the basin of the valley for the thousandth time that evening.

In his head, he was already going through what he would say to Ludwig by the end of the night (convincing himself that he *would* see him again by the end of the night). Feliciano rehearsed his apology, his explanation, but everything he came up with fell short. The guilt was eating away at him, fraying his nerves to a state no better than the tethered hem of his sweater. Perhaps he was just being dramatic, but it was nothing short of agony.

Feliciano did consider not confronting Ludwig at all - it couldn’t be too difficult, right? After all, nothing Feliciano could think of would do well enough to mend what he’d ruined. Maybe, when they brought Ludwig back, Feliciano could just hide, just get one peek around a corner to be certain that he was alright, and then slip away with Francis. No matter what Gilbert said, Feliciano was thoroughly convinced that Ludwig would not take kindly to seeing him again. Just imagining the anger and betrayal in his eyes if they saw each other again was more than Feli could bare. He could just leave once he knew Ludwig was safe, he didn’t have to know…

God, it was too much lying. Feliciano was so sick of it all.

“I need to take a walk,” Feliciano said, already turning to head out of the room before Francis could get a word in.

In the wide corridor, Feliciano thought he might have a little more space to breathe - he was half right. There was certainly more free room, not confined to the parlour. The space that he normally found so cozy now just felt claustrophobic and hot. Out here, the heat of the fire could not reach the long hallways, and so Feliciano felt a little like he was taking a breath of fresh air once he'd stepped out - but he was wrong in thinking it would help to clear his head.

So, he kept walking. Without a real destination in mind, Feliciano passed the dining room and the kitchen until he'd nearly walked by the Library. He paused a step past the door, thinking on it for a moment before turning back and entering the larger room. With it's high ceilings and walls upon walls of books, Feliciano figured he could at least have a bit of quiet in here. He was trying so hard to shut his mind off, to take Francis' advice and stop worrying so much, but it wasn't doing him much good so far. So, Feliciano turned on the light, the bulbs delayed in flickering on from the old wiring, and he began to walk around the perimeter of the room.

The shavings of the woodcarving Ludwig had been working on were swept into the ashes of the hearth, unburnt. It seemed like months ago now that they'd all been sitting in here, perfectly content and happy. The fact that it had only been yesterday was honestly a little jarring to Feliciano.

He continued around the room, unable to get yesterday morning out of his head. He never could have guessed what would transpire over the next 24 hours, let alone everything that had happened up to that point this evening. He felt almost a little heartsick thinking about it, the ease and familiarity that had enveloped this same room as Gilbert and Roderich bickered, and Erzsébet cleaned her swords, and Konrad…

Feliciano stopped at the wall holding the old relics, weapons hung in neat frames. Konrad had seemed almost like his old, proud self when he had taken Gilbert up on his challenge to clean the dueling pistols. Feliciano could not help but stop to wonder *why* Konrad had come. *Why* this year, of all years, had he decided to come out of his reclusive life, to show his old age in front of them, his old peers. Feli's gaze travelled over the centuries old weapons, some he still remembered being used. The flintlock pistol that Gilbert had cleaned so meticulously gleaned from its plaque, and next to it, Konrad's…

Was not there.

Feliciano frowned, turning about himself to look around the room. He assumed at first, that it simply hadn't been put back in its place, but Roderich would never have left something like that lying around… it really was not there.

It was gone. And the moment that settled in, everything else clicked into place. Konrad had been gone for hours already, but that did not mean he'd really left. Feliciano suddenly felt sick to his stomach. Sprinting to the window, he threw open the sash and stared up toward the summit of the mountain, toward Sankt Bacchus. There was no change, nothing at first glance that might suggest his worst fears, but as if the same force that had pulled Ludwig up to the Cathedral the day before was now calling out to him… Feliciano knew.

Pushing away from the window, Feliciano raced down the corridor. He tore through the foyer in the dark, only streaks of faint moonlight illuminating his path. Taking the turn too sharply, he bumped into a stone statue and knocked it over in his haste. The crash of the statue on the floor haunted him from the depths of a cold memory, but Feliciano did not stop. The deafening sound shot through the house, and by the time he'd made it to the parlour, Francis was already in the doorway catching him by the shoulders.

"Feli- Feliciano, stop!" Francis pleaded with him, just barely getting a hold of the struggling Italian. "What's going on, what's wrong?"

"I don't have time, Francis," Feliciano pleaded, "I don't- i-it's Konrad, he has the pistol, I think they're at the Cathedral!"

Francis frowned. "Feliciano, what pistol? What are you talking about?"

Feliciano wrenched his way free of Francis' hold. "There's no time!" Just barely dodging Francis' attempt to grab him again, Feliciano scrambled away and down the hall to the old servant's kitchen. With Francis trying to run after him, Feliciano did not waste a moment. He grabbed his winter coat off the hook as he ran out the door and out onto the snow. Francis' shadow, illuminated by the doorway and stretching out onto the snow, fell over Feliciano as he ran toward the mountain trail.

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Feliciano skidded to a stop in the snow, sweating in spite of the freezing cold as he fought to catch his breath. Standing in the shadow of Sankt Bacchus' gothic spires, he felt the weight of an unforgiving heaven looming over him. Ludwig was inside there. He was certain. The moon flinted off what was left of the stain glass, catching the jagged edges of the Cathedral window like bloodied teeth. He couldn't help but feel that this place had taken on a life of its own, possess and doomed to remain trapped here for all time. Feliciano had never been so scared. For the first time, it did not matter.

He was here, approaching midnight at the summit of the mountain, standing before the Cathedral like prey to an almighty predator. But Ludwig was in there.Feliciano steeled himself as best as he could, before approaching the still open doors.

He slipped through the gap, pushing his way in and stepping into the total darkness of the Cathedral. The moonlight streaking in from the windows every so often caught the light of a feature, or a statue, making demonic faces out of the walls, and mutilated corpses out of angels and saints. Feliciano fought back a shiver as he walked inside. "Ludwig?" he called out, with only his own voice to answer him back. "Ludwig! Ludwig, are you here?"

Feliciano turned in a slow circle as he walked toward the altar, paranoia biting between his shoulder blades, too afraid to leave his back unguarded against the prevailing darkness. He opened his mouth to call Ludwig's name again, only to stop when he was met with a howl of

wind resonating from behind the altar - not wind, he realized as he listened closer. A voice, muffled and dim, but roaring from the depths of the crypt below. Feliciano sprinted toward the hall behind the altar, where the stairwell door was already left open, and the moonlight was swallowed by impenetrable darkness. The stairs lead down into a light-less void, disappearing before they reached the bottom. Feliciano braced his hand in the doorway, gathering every ounce of courage he could, before running down the steps.

He kept his hand braced on the wall, the cool stone almost wet with condensation the further down he went. His eyes did not have time to adjust to the total darkness. His mind made shadows without light, demonic hands reaching out to grab hold of him and eyes watching him from the walls. Feliciano nearly tripped as he reached the bottom, catching himself on the opposite wall, the entombed grave of a past Bishop. A faint light glowed at the far end of the corridor like a divine mist. The shouting was louder now, still dampened by some obstacle, but clearly Ludwig's voice, pitched low in desperation. Feliciano raced toward the light.

He had not been in this chamber since the 19th century. Stumbling into that crypt was like free-falling into a distant nightmare. The source of the light was a small and powerful flashlight, perched up in what had once been a torch bearer on the wall. The wrought iron torch itself sat discarded on the ground. The air was thick with the hazy light, caught in the dust and dancing off every particle. Feliciano paused for a moment, head whipping around in desperate search of Ludwig.

A loud banging thundered from inside the stone casket. Feliciano's heart stopped, swallowing a scream as he staggered back. For a chilling moment, he imagined a mangled corpse rising from the casket, and hordes of undead breaking from their tombs. Feliciano pressed his back against the wall, fear raw in his throat. Something banged at the lid of the casket again, this time followed by an unintelligible voice - Ludwig. Shoving his terror aside, Feliciano raced toward the casket. "Ludwig!" he shouted, pressing his ear against the side. Ludwig responded, but the words weren't clear. It could have been Feliciano's name, or a cry for help, he couldn't be certain. "I- hold on, I'll get you out!" he replied.

Feliciano pushed at the lid, sweat beading on his brow as he threw all his strength at it - it wasn't enough. "I-I can't move it by myself!" he tried to shout into the side of the casket. Ludwig could have easily pushed the lid off on his own - but lifting it from inside was another matter entirely. "We have to do it together, okay? You lift, I'll push!" It was a long shot that Ludwig could understand him at all, but worth the effort. Feliciano braced his hands on the lid again, and shoved at the heavy stone slab. It took several attempts, but finally, he felt the weight lift slightly from the inside, and he was able to guide it off the casket. The stone fell to the floor, shattering into pieces with a deafening crack and revealing Ludwig inside, coughing and gasping for air as he lie in his own gave.

Feliciano didn't know how he'd gotten in there. He didn't know what was happening, or where the young Holy Rome's body was - he knew only that Ludwig was alive, he was safe, and for now even through his spine chilling terror, that was enough. Ludwig pushed himself up, Feliciano's hands bracing him with complete tenderness, as he struggled to breathe after God only knew how long he'd been inside the casket. When at last Ludwig's lungs cleared, he looked at Feliciano.

His eyes were older now. Physically unchanged on the surface, but Feliciano recognized that ancient light in the deeper window of his eyes, the soul behind them burdened with history. Ludwig's hand reached out to cradle his cheek. "Feliciano..." he breathed, and his name had an entirely new weight on his tongue. "You came back..."

Feliciano choked on a sob, laying his hand over Ludwig's. "Of course I did," he replied with a tearful smile. "You were in trouble, of course I came back. Now come on, we've got to get you out of here, we-"

The words died off in a mangled choke. A hand reached out from the darkness, wrapping around Feliciano's throat and dragging him back. Konrad, eyes manic with rage, slammed Feliciano against the wall. His ears rang as his head cracked against the stone, Ludwig's shout for him distant and feeble. Konrad squeezed, strangling Feliciano's throat and cutting off the air to his lungs. Feliciano gasped and struggled, clawing at the man's hand to no success.

Looming over him, his own body blocking out the light, Konrad snarled down at the Italian. " *You* ," he hissed. "You will not ruin this for me." The elder nation was entirely unhinged, combed hair falling haphazardly in his eyes, the lines of his face deepened by the harsh shadows. Moving aside, he kept his death grip on Feliciano's throat, using his other hand to yank his head up by the hair so he could face Ludwig as he climbed out of the casket and fell to his knees. "Tell him," Konrad seethed, his grip on Feliciano's hair drawing tears from the Italian's eyes.

Feliciano opened his mouth to speak, but the sound would not come out.

Konrad yanked his hair back harder. "Tell him how long you knew!"

Feliciano yelped. It took him a moment of struggling to breathe through his teeth for him to look Ludwig in the eyes and answer. "From... from the day I met you..." he gasped. "I-I was trying to protect you, I-"

Konrad did not let him finish. With an otherworldly snarl, he threw Feliciano back against the adjacent wall. Feliciano fell to the ground in a heap, Ludwig's roar of protective fury echoing throughout the chamber. Feliciano's vision blacked out, colours swirling through the darkness as he struggled through the pain to get up. When at least he managed to lift his head again, Ludwig was entangled in a brawl with Konrad, grabbing the man by the collar of his coat and punching him square across the jaw. He was weak, though, through shock and pain still evidence in his memory-crowded head. Konrad recovered, reaching into his pocket and brandishing his pistol at Ludwig's head. Ludwig just barely managed to grapple it from his hand before he could shoot. The gun clattered to the floor. Konrad scrambled for it, but Ludwig managed to hold him back. Konrad twisted in his grip, upper-cutting Ludwig beneath the chin and sending him falling back.

"You robbed me of eternity!" Konrad bellowed. His gaze darted to the pistol on the ground. "No..." he continued in a cooler tone. "Your brother did... so first, I'm going to kill you," he said as he plucked the gun from the rubble of the casket lid. "And I'm going to take my immortality back. Then, I'm going to kill your brother, and everyone who doomed me and my kin just to keep one ill-starred *boy* alive." Konrad paused there, turning a sickening eye

toward Feliciano across the chamber. “Except for maybe you...” he hissed with a rancid grin. “Maybe I’ll keep you.”

Feliciano’s stomach overturned in his gut, spilling cold acid. He watched as Ludwig stared up at the man in a mortal fear he’d never seen in him - and a pull at his mouth that looked too much like *guilt* . Feliciano shifted, trying to force himself to his feet, to *do something.* His foot brushed against the wrought-iron torch on the ground.

Konrad cocked the hammer of the pistol. “I had so hoped Gilbert would be here to see this,” he growled. “But I have waited far too long...”

His finger inched to the trigger.

A heaven shattering bang resonated through the chamber - but it wasn’t a gunshot. Feliciano grabbed the torch, stumbling to his unsteady feet, and swinging it with all his might. The torch rammed into the back of Konrad’s head with a disgusting crack. He fell to the ground in an instant, crumbling at Ludwig’s feet. Still on the ground and fighting for breath, Ludwig stared up at Feliciano in awe. Feliciano dropped the torch, yet another echo in a chamber that had been silent as death for centuries. Looking between the unconscious and very possibly dead man, and Ludwig, Feliciano recovered from his own shock enough to scramble over to the former. “Come on,” he urged, wrapping an arm around Ludwig and trying to tug him to his feet. “Come on, w-we need to go.”

“You knew...” Ludwig breathed as he stood. “All this time, you...”

Feliciano couldn’t bear this. He left Ludwig only for a moment, grabbing the flashlight off the wall before running back to him. “I’m sorry,” he panted. “I’m sorry, but we need to get out of here. *Please,* Ludwig.”

Ludwig shook his head. Coming to his senses somewhat, he nodded. Feliciano wrapped an arm around him to keep him steady, using the flashlight to guide their way out of the crypt, away from the empty tomb. The moment they breached the top of the stairs, stepping out into the Cathedral, the air was cleaning, easier to breathe. Ludwig coughed again, fisting his hand over his mouth, but did not waver. He leaned less and less on Feliciano as he caught his breath, wrapping his arm around him in return as they ran down the nave, away from the vacant altar, and out into the crystal night.

The moon was high when they made it outside. A light snowfall drifted down from the sky, but the stars still peaked through the gaps in the passing clouds, clearer than a bell tone. Feliciano stopped for a moment, tilting his head back just to bask in the clean air and open space. When he looked back at Ludwig, the man’s gaze was distant, looking down over the village like he was fresh from the grave, seeing everything again for the first time in an entirely new light. Feliciano did not know how much Ludwig remembered, but it was clear that there was a change in him. He shifted in front of him, lifting his hand to his cheek. “Ludwig...” he breathed.

Ludwig blinked, eyes clearing as they came into focus on Feliciano. He said nothing, just stared down at the Italian. Feliciano could practically see their centuries passing through Ludwig’s mind, a thousand years he never knew they had together returning to him in the

blink of an eye. Feliciano offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile, even as his lips trembled.

“Ludwig!” Gilbert’s voice echoed up to the Cathedral from the village below. “Feli!”

The two of them turned at once, watching as Gilbert, Erzsé, Roderich, and Francis all came racing up to the ridge. Gilbert sprinted ahead of them, wild with worry as he skidded to a stop just before running straight into them. He braced his hands on Ludwig’s shoulders, looking over his brother before laying his other hand on Feliciano. “Francis told us- fuck, where’s Konrad? What happened?”

Ludwig braced his hand on Gilbert’s shoulder in return. “Konrad was taken care of,” he answered. “Feliciano... he saved me.”

Gilbert dropped his hands, turning toward Feliciano, his panting breaths coming out as fog from his lips in the frigid night. “You...” he trailed off when Feliciano just nodded, still shrinking back slightly from Gilbert in fear of his condemnation - for being reckless again, for putting them in this mess in the first place. So, when all Gilbert did was pull Feliciano into a tight embrace, it was all he could do not to yelp in surprise. “Thank you…”

Feliciano could not think to find words in response. The relief was overwhelming, a century old burden lifting off his shoulders and leaving him weak. Feliciano hugged Gilbert in return, smiling tearfully when he pulled away.

The others had all caught up to them at that point. Gilbert let go of Feliciano and stepped back, allowing the others in, all shaking with relief that they’d found Ludwig alive and safe. Ludwig was relatively silent through it all, his eyes solely on Feliciano. When Feliciano caught his gaze, the Italian smiled again, eyes watering as he stepped in front of him again, at last unafraid to do so in front of the others. It was a relief he could not have fathomed, and thought he was still apprehensive of what this would mean for Ludwig - Ludwig was here. He was more himself than he’d ever been, and that look in his eyes was a thousand years of love he’d never comprehended before.

“All this time...” Ludwig repeated, voice barely audible as he cradled Feliciano’s face in his hands.

For once, Feliciano did not feel wretched and unworthy of that tenderness. He nodded, unable to find the words to articulate the years he’d loved him without Ludwig even knowing, the years he never thought he’d see him again, the agony of leaving him for the sake of his life. He doubted he’d ever find the right words to encompass all of that. Unable to stop smiling even through his tears, Feliciano threw his arms around Ludwig, burying his face against his shoulder and holding on for dear life. Ludwig held him with the same intensity.

In the valley, the bells of Sankt Sergius chimed midnight of Christmas. The tones echoed throughout the valley, ringing with such intensity up the mountain that Feliciano, for a moment, was convinced that the long-gone bells of Sankt Bacchus were answering back. He pulled his face back from Ludwig’s shoulder to stare up at the leviathan bell tower.

That was when he saw him. Konrad, staggering out of the Cathedral, blood pouring from his head. He left a crimson trail in his wake, dripping over the newly fallen snow. He held the pistol in his trembling hand, and raised it toward Ludwig's back.

Feliciano had always believed that bravery required some sort of choice, and decision to act selflessly for the good of someone else. This was not bravery. This was no choice at all. "Ludwig, look out!" Feliciano stammered in a rush, shoving himself out of his arms and putting himself between Ludwig and the threat.

The gunshot echoed with the chime of the bell tower.

Now, Feliciano had been shot before. He'd suffered through wounds that would kill a mortal man - it never felt like this before It'd never hurt this bad - and that was the moment he knew something was wrong.

Feliciano froze, body going stark cold as a white, searing heat bloomed between his ribs. Gruesome red dripped from his chest onto the virgin snow. It felt like an eternity that he'd spent staring back at Konrad's hate-filled eyes in pain and shock before time caught up with him. There was shouting echoing around him, resonating with the bells, and just as time had slowed down moments before, it was all too much to keep up with now. Feliciano felt his knees buckle, the world shifting and tilting. There were hands on his back, frantically holding his shoulders, the small of his back, trying to lower him gently to the ground. Feliciano struggled, trying to hold himself up, but any strength left in him was bleeding out fast. Ludwig's face eclipsed the moon, blurry at first, but as Feliciano's eyes came into focus, wide with terror.

"Feliciano," Ludwig's voice was commanding although it trembled in fear. His hand came up to cradle his cheek. "Feli, stay with me," he ordered. A heavy pressure over the seeping wound had Feliciano shrieking out in agony. He only barely registered Roderich kneeling at his side, eyes focused as he fought to stop the bleeding, the Austrian's determined face unfocused and hazy. Ludwig held him tighter. "I know, I know it hurts, just stay with me, you're okay.... my God, why would you-" Ludwig cut off abruptly, gaze darting toward the front of the Cathedral as a great clamour echoed off the ruins.

Feliciano's dropped, following Ludwig's gaze to the altercation before the Cathedral doors. Gilbert, Francis, and Erzsébet were advancing on Konrad, who was frantically trying to load another shot into the pistol. The man's fingers were stained with blood and black powder as he fished in his pocket for another cartridge, trembling in his haste. Erzsébet was faster than the other two, rushing after Konrad with a screeching roar. She grabbed the pistol, wrenching it down as she reared back with a solid punch to the man's jaw. The moment he stumbled back, Gilbert and Francis were on him, overpowering the former nation until they'd managed to get the pistol away. Konrad did not seem willing to give up without a fight, however. With the pistol out of his grasp, he brandished a knife from his back pocket and swung wildly at the other nations.

Feliciano couldn't make sense of it, could barely register what was happening, but he watched with a distant sort of awareness, their voices echoing off the surrounding buildings. The edges of his vision began to grow dark, creeping in deeper and deeper until the black

nearly overtook him. He had not realized that his eyes were closing until Ludwig gently squeezed his shoulder and spoke in his ear.

“Feliciano, keep your eyes open,” he commanded, though not without that same tell-tale tremor.

Feliciano’s head lulled, rolling to the side to rest against Ludwig’s shoulder. “Lud… Ludwig, I-I… I’m-”

Ludwig would not hear it. “Stop,” he shook his head, adjusting his hold. “Not a word, do you understand? Not a word.”

Gritting his teeth together as another wave of agony surged through his body, Feliciano shook his head, tears streaking down his cheeks. More shouting came from the others, and Feliciano managed to focus his gaze enough to watch as Erzsébet handed something to Gilbert before running back to them - a pocket knife, glinting with moonlight in his hand.

Before Feliciano could properly recognize what was happening, Erzsébet was suddenly at his other side, passing Roderich her scarf and petting his hair. “You’re alright, darling,” she hushed with an anxious smile. She had not called him “darling” in years. “You’re alright, just stay awake.”

Roderich tied the scarf around Feliciano’s torso, tight enough to bind his lungs. Feliciano choked, blood spilling between his teeth. “We need to get him down the mountain,” Roderich urged. “ *Now* , before he-”

“ ***You*** did this to me!” Konrad’s earth shaking roar drew their attention back to the confrontation. Everything was too hectic, too much for Feliciano to keep up with. He watched, struggling to keep up, as Francis swept the pistol up from off the ground and frantically unloaded it, while Gilbert faced off with Konrad. Though age had taken the man past his prime, he was still strong, more than enough to put up a struggle as Gilbert attempted to get the knife away from him while keeping a hold on his own. Konrad, for just a moment, managed to overpower Gilbert, throwing the Prussian to the ground. “To ***all*** of us! You doomed us all!”

Gilbert scrambled up to his feet, unwilling to stay on the ground long enough for Konrad to take any advantage. Breathing hard, rose up from his knees, blade still held tight in his hands. “The time of the Old Kingdoms was over, Konrad. We were all doomed already. I only insured that *he* would live on!”

“I will not be led to slaughter! Do you hear me? ***I*** am the last of the Old Kingdoms!” Konrad snarled.

That final testimonial resounded off the mountain peaks, but Gilbert did not flinch at its power. Slowly shaking his head, he took one dangerous step forward. Feliciano was fading, and he knew it, could barely keep the darkness from his vision now, but even still… as he watched Gilbert there was something ancient in him. Something terrifying.

“No, Konrad. This has gone on long enough,” Gilbert said. “You are not the last of the Old Kingdoms… ***I am*** .”

It was almost sweet, the way that Ludwig tilted Feliciano’s head away, pressing his face against his chest as the shouts and struggles grew to a bloody crescendo. Feliciano could not see what was happening, but he could hear when they suddenly went quiet - when everything went quiet. With his head cradled so tenderly against Ludwig’s chest, the only sound left in his slowly fading world was the solid beat of his heart.

The blood was not stopping. Feliciano yelped, breathing the oath of quiet as Roderich tried to press harder with the scarf to keep him from bleeding out. Both his and Erzsé’s scarves were already soaked through, with no signs of stopping. When Feliciano shifted his head back, Gilbert and Francis were just walking back to them. A smear of blood on Gilbert’s cheek slowly turned to dust, falling off his skin in a cold, cutting wind. Gilbert did not seem to pay it any mind, too busy staring down at Feliciano.

Everyone was staring at him, counting his breaths like they were afraid he’d turn to dust in Ludwig’s arms. They were right to, Feliciano realized with brief clarity.

For the first time in his life, he found himself on the precipice of mortality. Feliciano lay bleeding out onto the virgin snow, in the shadow of Sankt Bacchus. Over a thousand years could end that night. The bells were still ringing in the valley. The mountains shook with every tone.

And then came a silent night. The last echoes of Sankt Sergius died out, and the valley and surrounding mountains went quiet and still and calm - and somehow, Feliciano did too. Each breath was a struggle, and the pain was chasing away any light left him in, but he was calm. Ludwig was still murmuring to him, his face pressed against the crown of his head, pleading into his hair. Feliciano, hands trembling and terribly slow, reached into his pocket. It took everything left in him to take out the rosary, rubies glowing ethereal in the faint light of the moon. The world was still turning. The snow was still falling, and the night was beautiful.

Ludwig pulled back when he noticed Feliciano moving. Seeing the rosary in Feliciano’s hand, laying over his heart, Ludwig quickly took out its partner, wrapped between his fingers as he laid his hand over Feliciano’s. Feliciano smiled, weak and fading by the minute, and yet so full of love - it was too much for Ludwig to bear.

“Don’t-” he choked off. Feliciano had so rarely ever seen Ludwig break down like this. Fear didn’t sit right on his face. “Feliciano, don’t do this, don’t- *please* ,”

Ludwig’s voice faded into a chorus of pleading, repeating his name with increasing desperation - but as the sound dulled down into a distant whisper, and Feliciano’s vision went with it.

The stars-crossed above their heads, and went dark.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Austria, 1640's

In the sweet afternoon light, Feliciano tried to capture the way the leaves of the tree overhead casted dancing shadows over Ludwig's face. He tried to sketch the warmth of the day, and the scent of the blooming wild flowers right into the page. If he concentrated enough, he could almost catch the sound of Ludwig's voice in the lines of his mouth and the glint of sun in his eyes.

Of course, it was much harder to do any of this with the way the blond kept *moving* .

"It was a small town, but then again it wasn't a very large island to begin with, so everything was built high up on the cliffs over the sea," Ludwig spread his arms up, as if to imitate the height of it all. "We were only there for a few days, meeting with the Spanish Nobility and receiving messages from our informants in the French Courts-"

"Ludwig, as much as I *adore* hearing you talk for hours about the War… I really don't," Feliciano cut him off with a long roll of his eyes. "Now stop fidgeting. You're going to ruin your portrait."

From his place against the base of the oak tree, Ludwig turned to Feliciano and raised his brow in challenge. "I don't remember ever agreeing to sit for a portrait."

"You asked me out here with you," Feliciano shrugged. "You should know better. Now, stay still. And pick a less boring story."

Mocking Feliciano's own gesture, Ludwig rolled his eyes, but otherwise complied and let his arms relax over his knee and at his side. "It's not a boring story, you just didn't let me finish."

Feliciano looked back down at his parchment again, resuming his sketch. "I'm not interested in the War."

"The story isn't about the war."

"I wouldn't have guessed."

Ludwig stuck his foot out, nudging Feliciano's leg with the toe of his shoe. Feliciano, in retaliation, swatted his hand at Ludwig's calf, smearing his charcoal covered palm all over his trousers. He couldn't help but laugh as Ludwig retracted his leg, frantically trying to wipe it all off only to make a larger stain. When he looked up again, Ludwig was glaring at him.

"Are you going to let me finish, or not?"

Feliciano swept his hand out in a wide, rolling gesture as he shifted in the grass. For all his talk about not wanting to hear Ludwig's War stories, it may have been a little ironic that he'd spent the better part of the afternoon leaning back against the carriage wheel of a cannon. They were up on the rampart looking down over the valley, a little ledge of green nestled between Roderich's estate and the town up the mountain. The cannon stood still and unused, pointed down the slope, guarding against an invader that might never come. Meaning, of course, that it made a descent backrest for Feliciano to lean on while he worked. "You may continue."

"How kind of you," Ludwig retorted. Feliciano only smiled at him before shifting his concentration back to his sketch. He saw only from his peripheral vision as Ludwig smiled, shook his head, and looked back down over the valley. "Anyway, I was given some free time after we got what we needed to roam the island. I didn't spend much time in town, because my Spanish is not very good-"

"What island was this?" Feliciano interrupted.

"It was a Spanish one."

"Yes, but which Spanish one?"

"I can't remember the name."

"Menorca?"

"No, but that's close."

"Mallorca."

"That's it, thank you."

"You're welcome," Feliciano smiled. "Keep going."

Unfazed by the interruption (after all, he was more than used to Feliciano's outbursts of curiosity), Ludwig continued. "Well, since I was avoiding the town, I went down to the beaches. We'd spent so long travelling around the North of Europe, and the days before were so miserable and overcast, that I felt like I hadn't seen the sun properly in ages. So, when I got down to the shore, it was just as the sun was coming up, and I remember thinking that I'd never seen such blue seas and beautiful skies before. My next thought was that I wished you could have been there with me to see it."

"I don't think I've ever been to Mallorca, but Lovino's told me about it in his letters," Feliciano commented without looking up from his parchment. "They're known for their pearls, aren't they?"

"The entire island is covered with them," Ludwig nodded.

"It sounds beautiful."

"It is. When the War is over, I want to take you there."

Feliciano's hand stilled on the page. For a moment, his brows deepened, hair swaying over his face as a soft breeze rolled up the cliff side. "When the War is over…" he repeated quietly. Feliciano looked up, gaze trailing over the mountain side where he could just barely see the rooftop peaks of Roderich's home over the trees. "When are you leaving?" he asked.

Ludwig's mood made a similar drop. Winter was over, after all, and they'd known all along that he would have to leave again in the Spring. He sighed, picking at the blades of new grass surrounding him. "In several days, I'm told," he answered quietly.

The bird were chirping in the silence between their words. The wind was blowing through the trees. Crickets were singing in the shadows of the forest. Still, for all the ambient spring time noise, the two of them were entirely quiet. Finally, Feliciano decided he was finished with it. "Here," he said, passing Ludwig his parchment pad.

Ludwig quirked his brow, but took it nonetheless. The harsher lines of his face softened into a smile warmer than the mid-day sunlight as he looked over the sketch. "It is incredible," he remarked, before looking up at Feliciano, caught somewhere between confusion and amusement. "But I don't have a pearl oyster anywhere near me," Ludwig flipped the page around, and pointed to the little oyster Feliciano had drawn, sitting in the grass beside him, as his likeness looked down over the valley.

Feliciano grinned. "Yes, but we were talking about pearls," he replied as he pushed himself to his feet. He turned, bracing his foot on the spoke of the carriage wheel, and hauling himself on top of the cannon.

Ludwig instantly scrambled to his feet. "Feliciano, get down!" he shouted as, unheeding of his protests, Feliciano swung his legs over the cannon and straddled it like he was riding a horse side-saddle. "That cannon is a weapon, it's not something for you to be playing on."

"Well," Feliciano gestured down to the wide expanse of peaceful valley, "if the enemy decides this is the exact moment they are going to attack, I will be more than glad to get down." He waited a moment, glancing between Ludwig and the serene mountain range. "I don't think they are coming, Ludwig."

Ludwig huffed, his annoyance soon after fading into resignation as he climbed up onto the cannon after Feliciano. The Italian beamed at him, grabbing onto his shoulder and his arm to help him sit up beside him. Side by side, they soaked in the view and the afternoon glow.

Ludwig, with the parchment still in his hands, took more time to look over the fine details. "It really is a beautiful drawing."

"You can take it with you," Feliciano said as he braced his hands behind him and tilted his head back to bask in the sunlight. "To remember your promise to me."

Ludwig tilted his head. "I didn't know the pearls on Mallorca meant so much to you."

Feliciano sat upright again, swinging forward with the force of his laughter. "Not the pearls," he shook his head as he turned a wry glance up at Ludwig. "Your promise to come back."

For a moment, Ludwig seemed to flustered to say anything in response. He went red from the tips of his ears, to his cheeks, and down his neck. It was so utterly charming that Feliciano almost pitied him – almost. Instead, he just laughed, earning himself a light nudge from Ludwig with his elbow. Ludwig looked down at the parchment again. “In that case,” Ludwig murmured. “I think I’d much rather have a portrait of you.”

Feliciano’s smile only brightened. “You already have something to remember me by.”

The flush faded from Ludwig’s skin. He stared back at Feliciano, all at once calmed. He laughed quietly, setting the parchment down beside him. “You know,” he said, “the Arch Bishop is still furious about those rosaries. It is a shame the thieves were never caught.”

Feliciano laughed, waving the whole affair off. “By the time you come back, it will all have blown over,” he shrugged. The two were quiet again, but the comfort was still there. An ease hung between them that could not be disturbed or replicated, only made stronger by the gentle afternoon breeze and the golden sunlight flowing in patches over the hills below. “Ludwig,” Feliciano said as the thought came to mind, “when you do come back, we should go see that play.”

Ludwig turned to him with a frown. “What play?”

“The one about the lovers of Verona,” Feliciano laughed. “You got me a copy of the folio for Christmas.”

Ludwig nodded. “Oh, uh, yes,” he stammered. “I’d forgotten.”

Feliciano, as he so often found himself doing around Ludwig, rolled his eyes in teasing. “I am not surprised,” he said. “You are quite forgetful, you know. One day you may even forget my name.”

“I would never forget you.”

The abruptness of the statement, in all its simplicity, took Feliciano’s breath away.

Feliciano and Ludwig sat on the side of the mountain, bathed in warm Spring daylight, staring back at each other with mirrored expressions of awe and quiet love. When Feliciano smiled this time, it was soft, sitting closer to his eyes than his gentle mouth. “Do you promise?”

Ludwig, in a rare show of courage, laid his hand on top of Feliciano’s between them. “Of course.”

Well, there was nothing else to say, was there? A promise was a promise. Feliciano leaned over, pecking Ludwig on the cheek, and hopping off the cannon just as fast. He landed with his knees bent, popped up and spinning around with a grin in an attempt to hide his own blush. “Race you back to the house!”

Feliciano was racing onto the forest path before Ludwig could even get over his shock enough to get off the cannon – but when he did, he ran after the Italian with an indignant

shout about cheating. Simple as anything, they were best friends, chasing each other over the mountain.

It seemed, in that time, like Winter would never come again.

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Austria, Present Day

Feliciano came and went in waves. The brief moments of consciousness were so chaotic and unanchored that it was difficult to tell if they'd really happened or not. Feliciano could recall things with a distant sort of awareness, like watch a dream seep through his fingers as he tried to grasp it from the last dredges of sleep:

The dark closeness of the backseat of a car as it rolled down the mountain, taking the long roads from the village toward Roderich's house, held between Ludwig's chest and Roderich crouching on the floor of the car as he fought to keep Feliciano from bleeding out. Ludwig's voice, desperate and impatient, barking at his brother to drive carefully, to not hit so many bumps, that it was causing Feliciano pain. Gilbert's eyes in the rearview mirror, his voice even and understanding of Ludwig's panicked concern, replying that it was better to get back quickly than comfortably. Passing out again as he turned his face in against Ludwig's neck and clenched his teeth with broken sobs through the pain.

Screaming at the top of his lungs as the bullet was fished out of his chest, fighting with inconsiderable strength against the tweezers, and the disinfectant, and the stitches. The creaking of the mattress he'd been laid on as he struggled. Ludwig holding him down with an unwavering grip, his soothing whispers that "it was almost over" and "he was doing so well" a stark contrast to his brute strength.

Moaning through laboured breath because his skin was too hot and the bandages too tight. Feeling like hours had passed between each unfocused blink of his eyes. A cold cloth passing over his forehead, trying to bring him any small measure of comfort. Unintelligible whispering, the light dripping of the cloth in a basin of water, the gentle rustle of fabric.

His brother throwing the door to the room open, storming in with barely contained fury, and yet still managing to keep his voice to a harsh whisper as he cussed out whoever was there. Ludwig's face at his bedside, unfocused and unmoving as he took every word without complaint or defense. A lilting Spanish accent, Antonio, pleading with Lovino to calm down from the doorway. Lovino finally easing up, squeezing Feliciano's hand with the murmured threat of resurrection and subsequent murder if he died without permission.

Silence, but for the sound of steady breathing, and a sharp blade against wood. A sharp crack that shot like gunfire through the room. Wooden pieces falling to the floor with a rough

exhale. Ludwig's hand taking his, pressing his lips against his knuckles in a desperate prayer.

Feliciano did not know how much time had passed, or if everything had been real in the first place. Maybe he'd never actually found Ludwig in the crypt. Maybe he'd never left Austria. Maybe he was lying in bed, delirious with a fever from spending so long in the cold during his hike with Ludwig. Feliciano didn't know. He wasn't certain he cared to find out.

It was during a brief period of awareness that Feliciano barely managed to open his eyes enough to watch Gilbert walk into the room. Ludwig was sitting beside the bed, elbows on the mattress and head in his hands. Gilbert places a bottle of something that sounded like pills and a glass of water on the nightstand. The details were subdued and delayed, but Feliciano's half-lidded gaze was enough to make out the space – Ludwig's room.

Gilbert crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the wall adjacent to Ludwig's chair. "How're you feeling?"

Ludwig didn't seem to be paying much attention. "He's still in pain. He's barely been conscious for two days."

"No," Gilbert shook his head. "I asked how *you* are feeling."

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes, it fucking does."

Ludwig's following sigh was heavy, reverberating through his whole frame as he finally sat back in his chair. He hesitated, with an almost guilty drop in his shoulders, before pouring out a pill into his hand and chasing it down with water. Rubbing at his forehead in a vain attempt to massage away invisible pain, he finally slumped forward and dropped his hands. "It is… it's a lot to take in," he trailed off, staring down at his hands in his lap. "I am so much older than I ever thought I was… I had a whole life I never knew about. I never thought I'd been a *child* before…" Ludwig said as he turned his gaze up toward his brother. "And you kept it from me all this time."

"And I would do it again in a heartbeat," Gilbert replied without a moment's hesitation, before cutting off in a harsher tone. "Don't look at me like that," he snapped, and although Feliciano could not see Ludwig's face from this angle, half his vision blocked out by his pillow, he could imagine the sharp disapproval. "You know what I mean. Not…" Gilbert gestured down toward Feliciano, "not this."

Exhaling a measured breath through his nose, Ludwig reluctantly nodded.

Gilbert took what little truce he could get. "You have questions."

Ludwig pushed his hand back through his hair. "I just… I still don't quite understand *why* ."

This time, Gilbert thought over his words carefully. There was a long pause, and Feliciano nearly found himself fading into the comforting dark again, before Gilbert spoke. "I always knew that the other Kingdoms… they didn't understand. They never would. Your return

meant that you had gone too early – it was your destiny to live. As Holy Rome, you represented something greater than all of us, and I think that intimidated them. So, when you came back… I knew I had to keep you away from them. You were my responsibility in the past, and I let you down. I wasn't going to let that happen again."

Ludwig listened with rapt attention, and quiet awe. "You gave up Prussia…"

Gilbert shrugged. "You knew that already."

"It seems like so much more, now."

"I told you," Gilbert said with a long pause. "You were my responsibility. We Kingdoms… we were family. Ill-defined and fucked up, but we were family no matter how many wars we fought against each other. You were the youngest of us, and yet you always seemed to carry the heaviest burden. And then you just *died* . Couldn't live with that. So, when you came back… I wasn't going to fuck up a second chance. I knew the others didn't feel the same. They didn't give two fucks about you when you were Holy Rome, and they resented you when you became Germany. If they found out who you were, they could take your place. They could kill you. Some of them tried."

Ludwig was quiet for a moment, before sitting up straighter in his chair as the realization sunk its teeth into him. "Ernst…"

"Yeah," Gilbert nodded, throat thick. "Ernst, Konrad… I cared about them. They were my brothers, once. I didn't want to… but yeah. I made my choice a long time ago. They made theirs when they came after you," Gilbert sighed, the tension in his voice running him tight as a chord. "We were going to wait until they'd all passed, no matter how long it took, and then just… let you find out for yourself. It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was all we had. Feliciano… he had it the hardest. We were… *I was* too hard on him. Honestly, he terrified me. The closer you two were, the closer you came to finding out about your past. All of it fell on him." Gilbert paused again, and although Feliciano couldn't quite make out the details of his face, eyes barely open, he could feel the Prussia's gaze on him.

"I understand all of that now…" Ludwig began slowly. "What I still don't understand is *why* , Gilbert."

Surprisingly, Gilbert laughed. It seemed to catch Ludwig off guard, staring up at his brother in bewilderment. In the end, Gilbert just met his gaze with an even look. "You really have to ask?"

Another pause. Feliciano's eyes, heavy and strained, closed in a slow blink. When he opened them again, Ludwig had risen to his feet, standing in front of his brother with his back straight and his shoulders squared. Anyone else might have thought he was about to strike him – but in the next moment, Ludwig was pulling his brother into a tight embrace. It was a sort of affection they didn't show often. Gilbert clapped his back, returning the embrace with just as strong a hold. It didn't last long, but when they did pull away, Gilbert held Ludwig by the shoulders.

“I have spent… *far* too much time obsessing over what we are and how we got here. I think, in some way, I always believed that if I could just figure that out, I could control it. And in doing that, in my own fear, I’ve caused so much more heartache that I ever meant….He loves you, Ludwig. He has all this time. He’s the bravest man I know for it. He’s…” Gilbert trailed off there, looking over Ludwig’s shoulder, “shit, he’s awake.”

Ludwig turned in an instant, and Feliciano realized somewhat belatedly that they were staring at him. Rushing back to the side of the bed, Ludwig sat at the edge of the mattress, one hand resting over Feliciano’s on the sheet, and the other cradling the Italian’s cheek. “Feliciano,” he breathed.

Feliciano, a little more awake now, leaned his head into Ludwig’s warm, wide palm. “Hello….” he smiled.

The sigh of relief rattled through Ludwig’s entire body as he leaned over to kiss Feliciano’s forehead. Feliciano closed his eyes against the warmth of it, content and tired but otherwise lucid. He was just forcing his eyes open again when Gilbert laid his hand on Ludwig’s shoulder with a light squeeze, saying nothing out loud but everything with his gaze, before he turned and quietly left the room.

Now that he was awake, however, the pain came with it. Feliciano groaned, trying to breathe evenly through it but once again finding himself restricted. Just barely able to move, he lifted his hand toward his chest, feeling at the edge of the tight bandages.

Ludwig was quick to curl his fingers around Feliciano’s wrist and gently pull his hand away. “Don’t touch them,” he murmured.

Of all things, Feliciano pouted. He whined a little, just to show that he *very much* did not like this, but otherwise did not argue.

“Do you need anything?” Ludwig brushed a few stray hairs off of Feliciano’s forehead, and for the first time, he realized just how sweaty and grimy he felt.

Feliciano closed his eyes, swallowing past the cry rawness in his throat. He thought for a moment about asking for water, but when his stomach gave a dangerous lurch at the mere thought, he just shook his head. “No...what day is it?”

“It’s the 26 th ,” Ludwig answered.

Feliciano let out a pathetic whine again. “I missed Christmas.”

“You didn’t miss much,” Ludwig reassured him, continuing to card his fingers through Felicaino’s hair. “No one was quite in the mood for celebrating without you.”

Humming under his breath, Feliciano leaned into every touch. “Is everyone okay?”

Ludwig’s fingers paused. He shook his head, breathing out his nose in something that sounded suspiciously close to a laugh that Ludwig wouldn’t allow. “Everyone is just fine,” he

replied. “They’re all downstairs. I think your brother was about ready to burn the house down when he first got here, but everything has calmed down now.”

“Lovino is here?” Feliciano opened his eyes again, blinking his vision clear.

Ludwig nodded. “We called him as soon as you were… stable,” he said. “He and Antonio flew straight from Barcelona.”

“Mhm… I thought I’d remembered him coming in,” Feliciano murmured. “I’d assumed I was dreaming.” Slowly, he braced his hands at his sides and tried to push himself up, gritting his teeth against the ache. “I want to go downstairs and see them.”

Ludwig’s hand shot out to his shoulder in and instant, the other laying flat against Feliciano’s back to support him. “Feliciano, lie down,” he commanded. “You’re in no state to be moving, you can’t-“

“I took a bullet for you,” Feliciano retorted. Though exhausted and pale, his smirk was wry. “I feel like you owe me one.”

Ludwig sputtered. How on Earth was he supposed to respond to that? He blanched, staring back at Feliciano before sighing and giving in. Though reluctantly, he helped the Italian sit up right. “How can you joke about this?”

Feliciano smiled. “Ludwig, if I *don’t* joke about it, what else am I supposed to do?”

It was a point well made. So, Ludwig helped him carefully pull a loose sweater on, brought him water and helped him brush his teeth to get rid of the stale taste, and with careful arranging, carried Feliciano downstairs. Every movement was calculated and cautious. When Feliciano winced on the landing, tensing up in Ludwig’s hold as his wound protested, Ludwig stopped instantly, adjusting him until Feliciano could relax again.

Feliciano pressed a kiss to the underside of Ludwig’s jaw before laying his head on his shoulder. “My hero,” he murmured with a smile.

Ludwig shook his head. “I rather think that it’s the other way around,” he replied.

The parlour was warm when they entered. The fireplace was crackling pleasantly as it had been the entirety of the holidays. The hearth had always been a gathering place, a place of comfort, stable through-out the centuries, and now was no different. Everyone congregated around the fire. Ludwig carried Feliciano over to the sofa, where Francis and Antonio had been sitting and had instantly jumped up and moved out of the way when they saw the Italian. Feliciano smiled in silent thanks, holding back a grimace as he was set down. It was still a little painful for him to be sitting upright, so Roderich brought over a pillow (stolen right from under Gilbert’s arm without complaint from the chaise), so he could lean against Ludwig’s side.

Shifting and adjusting until he was comfortable, Feliciano grinned tiredly at Erzsébet as she brought him a blanket and draped it over his lap. “Wow, I’m really getting pampered,” he sighed. “Maybe I should do this more often.”

“Jackass,” Lovino cut in from the other side of the room without missing a beat. The elder Italian crossed over, sitting on the arm rest so he could get a proper look at his brother. Lovino raised a brow. “Look at you. You just had to go and be dramatic, huh?” Though his words may have been unremorseful and harsh, Feliciano could hear the relief in Lovino’s tone.

Feliciano shrugged. “You know me.”

Lovino’s smile was subtle, and could have easily been mistaken for a scowl if it weren’t for the softness around his eyes. “And look at where that’s gotten you.”

Tilting his head back, Feliciano looked up at Ludwig with an adoring glean in his heavy eyes. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think I can live with it.”

Ludwig said nothing, but he returned the look, rubbing his hand up and down Feliciano’s arm as he held him close.

“Well,” Erzsébet cut in as she shoved Gilbert’s legs off the length of the chaise to make some room for herself. “I think it’s safe to say that the worst thing to come from all of this, Feli, is that you brought *these three* under the same roof.”

No clarification needed there. Francis, Antonio, and Gilbert all looked at each other with wicked grins. From his place sitting at the piano bench, Roderich groaned. Feliciano merely laughed at the scene, more than happy to have brought everyone together. The circumstances may have been less than ideal, but how could he be anything less than happy when everyone he loved most where in the same room? Feliciano settled against Ludwig, shamelessly snuggling his head against the German’s broad chest. “Roderich,” he called, voice still a little hoarse. “Could you play me something?”

Roderich, tearing his glare away from the mocking faces that the obnoxious trio of friends were making at him, nodded. He rolled up the sleeves of his brown sweater to his elbows, turning on the piano bench to face the Grand. “Any requests?” he asked.

“Whatever you’d like,” Feliciano replied.

A crooning melody soon filled the room, each press of the keys gentle and tender, as if the piano itself was being mindful of the quiet atmosphere. Feliciano, whether it was of his own accord or not he couldn’t tell, closed his eyes and turned his ear in against Ludwig’s heart, beating strong and steady and in time with the music.

Ludwig leaned down enough to whisper in his ear. “You’re still feeling alright?” he asked.

Feliciano smiled, turning his head up to catch Ludwig’s lips in a slow kiss, unafraid of being seen for the first time in decades. In all honesty, he was tired, covered in dried sweat, and in pain – and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so happy. “Perfect.”

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Ludwig needed some fresh air. Some time to think, to sort himself out. He stayed by Feliciano's side and was glad to do it, but there was too much he hadn't given himself the time to absorb. Over the past several days, the Italian made a good recovery – slow by a nation's standards, but nothing short of miraculous to a mankind. No one quite understood how it had all worked, yet – whether Konrad's former Nationhood would have been enough to kill Ludwig because of their shared states, but wasn't enough to kill Feliciano. Whether or not it was just a lucky shot. No one knew, and no one voiced the question, but it was there, lingering in the air of the house. Regardless, Feliciano was recovering. That was what mattered.

And with all of his focus narrowing down to that, it had been somewhat easy for Ludwig to compartmentalize everything he'd been through. In caring for Feliciano, he'd been able to ignore the whirlwind of his relationship, the trauma of rediscovering his identity, the flood of his memories. Still, he couldn't hide from it all forever – tempting as it was.

So, when Feliciano had fallen asleep that evening, Ludwig went down the mountain. He'd nearly turned back several times, but with the reassurance that the others were more than capable of taking care of Feliciano, he allowed himself to take some time on his own.

It was New Year's Eve. The Markets in the town seemed even busier than they had the week before, filled with life and lights and celebrating the coming year. Ludwig parked his car at the canal once again, watching the skaters glide across the ice below. He would wander around for a bit, clear his head, and then maybe pick up a bottle of champagne or sparkling cider to bring back up for midnight. With that in mind, and a couple hours to spare, Ludwig lost himself in the crowds.

And – well, it was all just a little overwhelming, wasn't it? Putting it lightly. When Ludwig walked these streets now, he remembered them. Remembered when it was a fledgling little Hamlet, passing through on his way to the larger village atop the mountain. He remembered the bakery, and Sankt Bacchus in its prime. He remembered centuries before either of them existed. The details of his life were stringing together with such clarity now that he wasn't quite sure how he'd ever forgotten them in the first place. There was, to be honest, a little pang of loss in his chest, thinking about the time that he'd truly lost – the near century and a half that he'd been dead. Ludwig had never felt incomplete before. He'd known exactly who he was, and now… there was this gap left, and so many memories he still hadn't full processed.

Yet he was at peace. It was difficult to describe, and Ludwig still didn't understand the feeling himself. He wasn't sure if he should feel like a different person now. If Nations – no, if *people* were defined by their memories, what did that mean for him? There were no easy answers.

Ludwig thought all of this over as he wandered between the stalls of the central market, beneath the shadow of Sankt Sergius. He felt a chill down his spine every time he found his eyes trailing up the mountain, and finding the distant spires of Sankt Bacchus looming like a holy ghost behind its partner.

It was as he was tearing his gaze away from the haunting sight, redirecting his eyes to the clock face on the tower of the church that Ludwig decided he ought to head back up. Standing among the crowded stalls and glistening decorations, Ludwig turned back toward the canal. He stopped short.

Holding onto Gilbert's arm to keep himself steady, Feliciano walked toward him with a brilliant smile that had absolutely *no* business being so charming when he was in such a state. Ludwig, exasperated beyond anything, sighed and walked over to him. He let Feliciano hold onto his arm, using his other hand to brace the small of his back.

"Feliciano, what are you doing?" he asked with a stern glower. "You know you shouldn't be out like this."

Feliciano was all too glad to hold onto Ludwig, letting go of Gilbert with a smile of thanks before clinging to the blond's arm. "I'd heard you were at the Christmas Markets without me," he replied. "I couldn't let you get away with that."

Ludwig turned his glare up toward his brother. "And you just let him?"

Gilbert, shoving his hands into his coat pocket, just shrugged. "He pulled an I.O.U."

"Ludwig," Feliciano beamed, his laughter light as a bell as he cupped the German's face and guided his focus back down to him, "I'm okay. Really. A little sore, but I'm okay." As if to prove his point, he leaned up on his toes to peck Ludwig's lips. He winced a bit as he came back down, but the smile never left his mouth. "So, can we just enjoy this? Please?"

Ludwig hesitated, but in the end, was no match for that pleading. "Alright," he sighed. "But you are taking it easy tomorrow, do you understand?"

Feliciano raised his hand in a mock salute. "Yes, sir."

The look of disapproval was ruined only by a smile threatening to surface on Ludwig's mouth. He shook his head, giving his brother another long look and a nod. He could take it from here. Gilbert grinned, giving the two an off-handed wave before turning and heading down the lane of stalls. For the first time, Ludwig noticed the others all waiting at the other end, watching them attentively before Gilbert shoed them away. They would be close by, enjoying the evening, but otherwise leaving Ludwig and Feliciano to themselves. Ludwig lingered a moment, watching them vanish into the crowds, before relenting to Feliciano's tugging.

They walked slowly. Feliciano was hardly in any state to go skipping around the market, but his enthusiasm wasn't the least bit dampened. He held onto Ludwig's arm, marvelling at every little detail surrounding them.

"You're sure you're feeling well enough to be out?" Ludwig asked.

Feliciano turned a smile up at him. "I'm sure," he reassured him. "I wasn't going to miss this for anything."

Well, Ludwig thought to himself, he supposed he couldn't argue with that – or he very well could, but Feliciano had a way of swaying him over with delights like these. Reassuring himself that if he noticed Feliciano getting tired or sore, he'd make him sit down, he gave in and allowed himself to enjoy the night. It wasn't long until Midnight anyway.

So, he let Feliciano lead him through the lanes, stopping at any and every stall that caught his attention. He watched the Italian like a hawk for discomfort, but as time went on, found himself relaxing more and more. It was difficult to be tense when Feliciano's eyes were glistening with awe and adoration. It still astounded him – and even more so now with all he knew – how Feliciano could maintain so much innocence after all of the hardship in his life. Well, perhaps innocence wasn't the right word. He took unabashed pleasure in the things he loved, and never once allowed the vile little things in the world to taint his kindness. Feliciano loved. That was what he did. Ludwig found himself seeing Feliciano in an entirely new light now, just when he thought he couldn't possibly love him more. He wondered, sometimes, how Feliciano had looked at him all these years.

"Look!" Feliciano pulled at Ludwig's arm until they were standing in front of a stall boasting incredible wooden carvings and toys, delicately painted and polished. "Aren't they beautiful? Oh, that reminds me! What did you decide to carve? Did you ever end up finishing it?" he asked.

Ludwig shook his head, recalling the wood carving he'd started the morning before he and Feliciano went on that hike. "I tried to work on it while you were unconscious," he replied. "But I was too tense, I suppose. I ended up snapping it in half before I'd ever decided what it would be."

Feliciano pouted. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Ludwig said as they started walking down the lane again. He was silent for a long moment, staring up at the strings of garland and red velvet bows draped between the stalls, before he spoke again. "I have been meaning to ask you…" he began. "When you ended things between us the first time… was it because...," he couldn't seem to find the right turn of phrase, but Feliciano understood.

"They didn't force me, if that's what you mean," Feliciano responded. "Gilbert, Erzsé, and Roderich… after Ernst tried to get you alone, we all knew I would have to break up with you. The closer we were, the closer you became to remembering your past. It hurt, but I did it because I knew that I had to." Feliciano paused, smiling to himself as a light snow fall began to drift down in thick flakes. They coated the ground in a light dusting, and glittered in the air like diamonds. "You know, I tried very hard to avoid you, at first. Remember the first time we met? Well, not really the first time, but you get it," he laughed. "After I realized who you were, I told myself that I was not going to get my heart broken again. Absolutely not. So, I avoided you for as long as I could."

Ludwig nodded, thinking it all over with renewed clarity. "We didn't meet again until The Great War."

Feliciano shook his head, still laughing through the memory. "When I saw you were coming, I hid in that supply crate just hoping you wouldn't find me! It didn't work, of course, and

then I panicked and tried to make it look like I was afraid of you, although I knew you'd never hurt me, even if you barely knew who I was," Feliciano sighed in content, tilting his head back to the sky. "I couldn't stay away, no matter how hard I tried. You were a different person. You weren't the boy I knew anymore. But!" Feliciano stopped, stepping in front of Ludwig and poking a slender finger at his chest. "You still had the same heart," he smiled. "Once I realized that, there was no hope left. I couldn't stop myself from falling in love with you all over again."

Ludwig's breath flooded out his chest. He stared down at Feliciano in total astonishment, unable to summon a clear thought, let alone formulate a response. He never got the chance to, anyway. Feliciano, with a little smirk that said he knew exactly the effect his words had, soon turned his attention elsewhere. "Oh, Ludwig! They have mulled wine! I've been waiting this whole trip to have some!" With insistent tugging, Ludwig followed haplessly after him.

The mulled wine gave off a wafting scent from far down the lane. It was being brewed in a cast iron pot over a crackling fire pit, in a sort of cul-de-sac at the end of a row of stalls. Cinnamon, cloves, and sweet orange peel rolled off with the steam, as the vendor ladled out a mug for Feliciano's waiting hands. Ludwig raised a brow as he took his own mug and paid, unable to keep from smiling at the expression of complete bliss on Feliciano's face.

"You know," he said, "you probably shouldn't be drinking that in your state."

"I don't even care," Feliciano took a long sip, practically moaning as he swallowed the warm drink. "It's perfect."

He'd been about to continue on, and Ludwig had been about to follow, when the blond's eye was caught by the little table of treats the vendor had a little ways away from the fire. Ludwig walked over, with Feliciano still holding onto his arm and watching him curiously. Without saying much, Ludwig beckoned the vendor over, and pointed out one of the treats. In short order, Ludwig paid, and the vendor placed his choice in a little cardboard box, wishing them both a Happy New Year.

Feliciano resisted the urge to rise up in his toes to peak into the box. "What did you get?"

Ludwig plucked what looked like a chocolate truffle from the box and placed it in Feliciano's palm. "Try it."

Although he gave Ludwig a wary glance, Feliciano complied and took a bite out of the chocolate. Ludwig watched as the Italian's eyes widened in joy. "Are these spiced figs?"

Ludwig nodded, taking a sip from his own wine. "It was something I'd remembered… I used to take the figs from your plate, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did!" Feliciano laughed, nudging Ludwig lightly with his shoulder. "I would get so *mad* at you, because we'd only ever get them on special occasions, and even then they were rare."

"Then I supposed I have a lot to make up for," Ludwig replied.

An unreadable expression ghosted over Feliciano's face. A soft breath left his lips as if it'd been pushed from his chest. Finally, he smiled. "This is a start," he said as he popped the rest into his mouth.

The wine was hot, and the night was cool, and despite the serenity he felt, Ludwig still found himself conflicted. It was an odd and intrusive thought, but one he hadn't been able to banish all night. Soon after they finished their wine, the thought returned. As they continued on, heading toward the centre of the market, where the large Christmas Tree gleamed like a beacon in the night, Ludwig finally put it to words.

"I am…" he began, and faltered, drawing Feliciano's attention with a head tilt. Ludwig cleared his throat. "I'm not quite certain who I am supposed to be anymore," he confessed.

"What do you mean?" Feliciano asked in honest concern.

"I'm not sure," Ludwig frowned. "I don't feel any different, and yet… everything has changed. The Holy Roman Empire… it's a name that I'd only ever associated with the past, something that was dead and gone. I'd only ever learned about it in history, and never thought of it as a person… but it was *me.* What you said before was right, I was a different person back then. I just can't seem to find where exactly Holy Rome ends and Germany begins," he shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't think I'm articulating myself very well."

"No, I understand," Feliciano said. "It can't be easy… but I know exactly who you are," he smiled. "You are Ludwig. Just as you always have been. I'm not the same person I was back then either, Ludwig. People change. Even Nations. You get to decide what all of that means, even if it means nothing at all."

They turned down the end of the lane then, stepping into the wider space in the centre of the market, where a large crowd was surrounding the Christmas tree, staring up at the clock face of Sankt Sergius. Face lighting up with an idea, Feliciano turned to Ludwig just as they stopped between the church and the towering tree, washed in gold and silver lights. The walls of the town where high above the square. Everything felt closed in and safe. Feliciano let go of Ludwig's arm, taking a few steps back from him despite Ludwig's sputtered protests to be careful.

"But, if it helps to give you a more definitive beginning and end, I would be more than happy to meet you all over again," he radiated love with every word.

As he so often was, Ludwig was entirely speechless at Feliciano's antics. The crowd in the square began chanting down the seconds to midnight in an echoing chorus, but for all Ludwig noticed, he and Feliciano were the only people there. He laughed. Honestly laughed, deep and resonating in his chest. At last, he decided to play along. In an older custom, he folded his arms across his chest and behind his back, and gave a short bow. "Ludwig Beilschmidt."

Feliciano practically giggled in amusement, thrilled and glowing with it. With perhaps a little too much eagerness, he mirrored Ludwig's bow. "Feliciano Va- ah!" he yelped as his wound gave a painful protest.

All playfulness gone in an instant, Ludwig rushed forward, steadying his hands on Feliciano's shoulder and waist. "Are you alright?" he probed, eyes already raking him over for signs of agony or leaking stitches.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Feliciano's voice was tight as he held onto Ludwig's arm, one hand still clutched over his wound. He straightened back up slowly, gaze rising up to meet Ludwig's. Those wide brown eyes lit up with gold, the most precious sight Ludwig had ever seen. Their light glistened and wavered as tears pooled at the edges. "It's just…" Feliciano choked through a radiant smile. "I have been waiting a very long time to meet you."

Midnight struck. The crowd erupted into cheers. Fireworks burst in the sky overhead with dazzling colours. Confetti rained down between the snowflakes, thrown up by handfuls in the crowd. Feliciano stared up at it all. In that moment, he was entirely enchanted. Ludwig's eyes never left him. Reaching up, he brushed his fingers over Feliciano's cheek, drawing his gaze back. Feliciano looked almost surprised in the second before Ludwig kissed him – like he truly was seeing him for the first time again. Ludwig held him like the dearest thing in all the world. Everything else melted away. The moment Feliciano threw his arms around Ludwig's shoulders and kissed him back, Ludwig pulled him in closer.

Feliciano was sobbing when Ludwig pulled away. Centuries of pent up emotion all came flooding out at once, and still, it was the happiest he'd ever been. Ludwig pressed their foreheads together, before Feliciano was burying his face against his shoulder. All of it had come to this; one moment of affection shouting louder than any chorus, longer lasting than any love story.

I loved you then, I love you now, and I'll love whoever you will become.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not really sure I can articulate myself right now. I said in my notes at the beginning that this was a story I'd been meaning to write for years now. Now that it's down on paper, I find it so much more powerful to me that I'd ever thought possible. And, like I'd said, it was grossly romantic. It was overly dramatic. Historical liberties were taken. And the characters were absolute and complete morons up until the very end. I've loved every fucking second of it.

Thank you so much for coming along with me. This was entirely self indulgent. The prose was experimental, and God knows the characters were too. Still, the response I've gotten is overwhelming. I am so beyond grateful for your kind words.

Happy New Year.

End Notes

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